DEC.

REAL WESTERN ROMANCES

25¢

ANC

32 More Pages

GUN-SHY DUDE
by T. C. Mc Clary

SADDLE-TRAMP
by E. Hoffman Price

ROMANCES OF THE RANGE

GIVEN

PREMIUMS-CASH

Boys! Girls! Men! Ladies! Wrist Watches, Pocket Watches, Lovable fully Dressed Dolls over 15" in height (sent postage paid). Other Premiums or Cash Commission now easily yours. **SIMPLY GIVE** pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE easily sold to friends, neighbors, relatives at 25 cents a box (with picture) and remit per catalog sent with your order postage paid by us to start. Write or mail coupon today. We are reliable. Be first. **WILSON CHEM. CO., Dept. A-87, TYRONE, PA.**

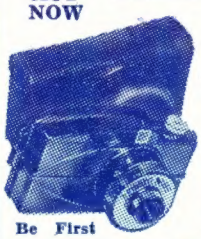
GIVEN

PREMIUMS-CASH

ACT NOW

55th year

BOYS GIRLS LADIES



Be First

Mail Coupon

Daisy Red Ryder Air Rifles with tube of shot, Candid Cameras with carrying cases (sent postage paid). Other Premiums or Cash Commission now easily yours. **Simply Give** pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE easily sold to friends, neighbors, relatives at 25 cents a box (with picture) and remit amount asked under Premium shown in catalog sent with your order postage paid by us to start. Our 55th year. **WILSON CHEM. CO., Dept. B-87, TYRONE, PA.**

GIVEN - PREMIUMS or CASH - GIVEN

BOYS GIRLS

55th Year

Pocket Watches, Wrist Watches, Genuine 22 Caliber Rifles, Footballs (sent postage paid). Boys-Girls Bicycles (sent express charges collect). Other Premiums or Cash Commission now easily yours. **SIMPLY GIVE** beautiful pictures suitable for framing with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE easily sold to friends, neighbors, relatives, at 25 cents a box (with picture) and remit amount asked under Premium shown in catalog sent with your order postage paid by us to start. Send no money now. We trust you. Our 55th year. Write or mail coupon today. Be first.

WILSON CHEM. CO., Dept. C-87, TYRONE, PA.

OUR 55th YEAR

WE ARE Reliable

Act Now

MAIL COUPON

LADIES - MEN

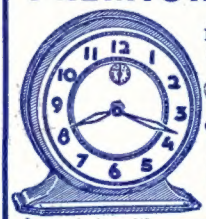
GIVEN

Premiums-Cash

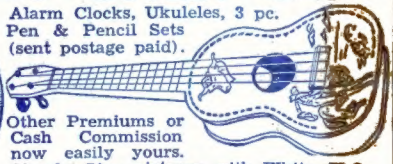
BOYS - GIRLS **ACT NOW**

BOYS! MEN! Complete Fishing Kits, Telescopes, Movie Machines, Electric Record Players (sent postage paid). Other Premiums or Cash Commission now easily yours. **SIMPLY GIVE** beautiful pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE for chaps and mild burns and easily sold to friends, neighbors, relatives at 25 cents a box (with picture) and remit per catalog sent with your order postage paid by us to start. We are reliable. Our 55th year. **Wilson Chemical Co., Dept. D-87, Tyrone, Pa.**

PREMIUMS - GIVEN - CASH



Alarm Clocks, Ukuleles, 3 pc. Pen & Pencil Sets (sent postage paid).



Other Premiums or Cash Commission now easily yours. **Simply Give** pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE sold at 25 cents a box (with picture) and remit per catalog sent with your starting order postage paid by us. Be first. **WILSON CHEM. CO., Dept. E-87, TYRONE, PA.**

MAIL COUPON TODAY

Wilson Chem. Co., Dept. DA-87, Tyrone, Pa. Date.....

Gentlemen:—Please send me on trial 13 colorful art pictures with 13 boxes of White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE to sell at 25c a box (with picture). I will remit amount within 30 days, select a Premium or keep Cash Commission as fully explained under Premium wanted in catalog sent with my order postage paid to start.

Name ..... Age.....

St. ..... R.D..... Box.....

Zone

Town .....No..... State.....

Print LAST Name Here

Paste on a postal card or mail in an envelope **NOW**

ARTHUR GODFREY SAYS:

"I.C.S. made the impossible—easy!"

YOU'VE often heard Arthur Godfrey, famed "Huck Finn of Radio," on his coast-to-coast "Talent Scouts" and other CBS programs—now winning new renown on television. But this is the first time you've heard the star on the subject of I. C. S.:

> ***"I had to quit high school before the end of my second year. Later in life, at the U. S. Naval Materiel School at Bellevue, D. C., I had to master a working knowledge of math, all the way from simple decimals and fractions through trigonometry, in the first six weeks or be dropped from the course. So I took an I.C.S. Course and finished at the head of the class! I.C.S. made the impossible—easy!"***

As usual, the former Navy radio operator and present Lt. Commander in the U. S. Naval Reserve knows what he's talking about. As an I.C.S. graduate, Mr. Godfrey is in the best of all positions to tell you about the educational system that's served so long as talent scout for American industry.

Study his statement. Then mark your interest on the coupon and mail it today for full information on what I.C.S. can do for *you!*

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

APPROVED under the G.I. BILL

BOX 5923-D, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

Business and Academic Courses
- ☐ Accounting
- ☐ Advertising
- ☐ App. Psychology
- ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Bus. Correspondence
- ☐ Bus. Law
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ French
- ☐ Good English
- ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics
- ☐ Illustration
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Postal Civil Service
- ☐ Retailing
- ☐ Retail Bus. Management
- ☐ Salesmanship
- ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering
- ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Spanish
- ☐ Traffic Management

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating
- ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration
- ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemical Courses
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Petroleum Refining
- ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Prac. FM and Television
- ☐ Prac. Telephony
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician
- ☐ Power House Electric
- ☐ Ship Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
- ☐ Auto Technician
- ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines
- ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineer's, Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Forging
- ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop
- ☐ Machine Shop Inspection
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting
- ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding Engineering
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses
- ☐ Air Brake
- ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Locomotive Machinist
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman
- ☐ Steam and Diesel Loco. Eng.

Stationary Engineering Courses
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combus. Engrg.
- ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Power Plant Engr.
- ☐ Steam Engineer

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Loom Fixing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Name_____ Age_____ Home Address_____

City_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to_____ P.M.

Present Position_____ Employed by_____

Length of Service in World War II_____

Enrollment under G.I. Bill approved for World War II Veterans. Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces.

Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

REAL WESTERN
ROMANCES

December
1950
Volume
Two
Number
One

★ 32 MORE PAGES ★

Three Feature Novelets

GUN-SHY DUDE ..... T. C. McClary 8
Only Sarah Crooswaite believes in the despised Pete Giller, the yankee who, apparently, won't work and is afraid to fight.

TROUBLE AT TRIANGLE ..... Roe Richmond 28
Yearning for love, Alma Winslow finds herself drawn to this lobo leader, Duke Emberly when his outlaws hole up at Triangle.

SADDLE TRAMP ..... E. Hoffmann Price 58
Determined to prove himself, Bill Jordan finds he must keep quiet and watch old man Gregg convicted of a self-defense killing Bill did.

Romantic Novel

THE DEVIL'S MARKER ..... J. J. Mathews 94
Bud Grayson returns to lead the homesteaders' fight for their rights, only to find himself hopelessly in love with Neva McKinney, daughter of the range baron he must crush.

Short Stories and Department

RUSTLER'S DARLING ..... H. C. Eaton 47
Mollie's quick temper drives Brad Steele away, but her heart goes to him just as quickly when a lynch mob hunts him down.

HEARTBREAK TRAIL ..... Cliff Campbell 81
When at last he finds the girl of his dreams, Rance Kane discovers he must defend her, and protect her tenderfoot husband.

THE CORRAL CLUB 92
Letters from Pen Pals, selected by Ramrod Pete.

★ *Robert W. Lowndes, Editor* ★

REAL WESTERN ROMANCES, published quarterly, March, June, September, and December, by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Strset, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass. under the act of March 3, 1879. 25c per copy; yearly subscriptions $1.00. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in the U. S. A.

BE A SUCCESS AS A RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIAN

TWO FREE BOOKS SHOW HOW MAIL COUPON

America's Fast Growing Industry Offers You All Three

1. EXTRA MONEY IN SPARE TIME

Many students make $5, $10 a week extra fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time. The day you enroll I start sending you SPECIAL BOOKLETS to show you how to do this. Tester you build with parts I send helps you service sets. All equipment is yours to keep.

2. GOOD PAY JOB

Your next step is a good job installing and servicing Radio-Television sets or becoming boss of your own Radio-Television sales and service shop or getting a good job in a Broadcasting Station. Today there are over 81,000,000 home and auto Radios. 2700 Broadcasting Stations are on the air. Aviation and Police Radios, Micro-Wave Relay, Two-Way Radio are all expanding fields making more and better opportunities for servicing and communication technicians and FCC licensed operators.

3. BRIGHT FUTURE

And think of the opportunities in Television! In 1949 almost 3,000,000 Television sets were sold. By 1954 authorities estimate 20,000,000 Television sets will be in use. 100 Television Stations are now operating, with experts predicting 1,000. Now is the time to get in line for success and a bright future in America's fast growing industry. Be a Radio-Television Technician.

HURRY VETERANS

G. I. Bill gives you valuable training benefits. But time is running out. Act now to get N. R. I. training under G. I. Bill. Mail Coupon. Hurry!

I TRAINED THESE MEN

CHIEF ENGINEER, POLICE RADIO
"Soon after finishing the N.R.I. course, worked for servicing shop. Now I am Chief Engineer of two-way FM Police Radio Installations."—S. W. DINWIDDIE, Jacksonville, Illinois.

SHOP SPECIALIZES IN TELEVISION
"Am authorized serviceman for 5 large manufacturers and do servicing for 7 dealers. N.R.I. has enabled me to build an enviable reputation in Television."—PAUL MILLER, Maumee, O.

$10 WEEK IN SPARE TIME
"Before finishing course, I earned as much as $10 a week in Radio servicing, at home in spare time. Recommend N.R.I. to everyone interested in Radio."—S. J. PETRUFF, Miami, Fla.

WORKS FOR TELEVISION DEALERS
"Am tied in with two Television outfits and do warranty work for dealers. Fall back to N.R.I. text books often for installing Television set."—ROBERT DOHMEN, New Prague, Minnesota.

I Will Train You at Home

You Practice Servicing or Communications with MANY RADIO KITS

Keep your job while training at home. Hundreds I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIANS. Most had no previous experience; many no more than grammar school education. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. Get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE—build valuable multitester for conducting tests; also practice servicing Radios or operating transmitters—experiment with circuits common to Radio and Television. You keep all equipment. Many students make $5, $10 a week extra fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time. SPECIAL BOOKLETS start teaching you the day you enroll.

Send Now For 2 Books FREE—Mail Coupon

Act Now! Send for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. Coupon entitles you to actual lesson on Servicing; shows how you learn Radio-Television at home. You'll also receive my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television." You'll read what my graduates are doing, earning; see photos of equipment you practice with at home. Send coupon in envelope or paste on postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. ONA2 National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C. Our 37th Year.

Have Your Own Business

Many N.R.I. trained men start their own Radio-Television sales and service business without capital. Let me show you how you, too, can be your own boss, have a good income from your own shop.

You Build This MODERN RADIO

As part of my Servicing Course, you build this complete, powerful Radio Receiver that brings in local and distant stations. N.R.I. gives you ALL the Radio parts . . . speaker, tubes, chassis, transformer, sockets, loop antenna, etc.

You Build This TRANSMITTER

As part of my Communications Course, I SEND YOU parts to build this low-power broadcasting transmitter. You learn how to put a station "on the air," perform procedures demanded of Broadcast Station operators, make many practical tests.

Good for Both—FREE

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. ONA2
National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

Mail me Sample Lesson and 64-page Book about How to Win Success in Radio-Television. Both FREE. (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name..... Age.....

Address.....

City..... Zone..... State.....

☐ Check if Veteran

Approved Under G. I. Bill

IF IT SLIPS... IF IT CHAFES... IF IT GRIPES... THEN

THROW AWAY THAT TRUSS!

Why put up with days . . . months . . . YEARS of discomfort, worry, and fear—if we provide you with the support you want and need? Learn NOW about this perfected truss-invention for most forms of reducible rupture. Surely you keenly desire . . . you eagerly CRAVE to enjoy most of life's activities and pleasures once again. To work . . . to play . . . to live . . . to love . . . with the haunting fear of Rupture lessened in your thoughts! Literally *thousands* of Rupture sufferers *have* entered this *Kingdom of Paradise Regained* . . . have worn our Appliance without the slightest inconvenience. Perhaps we can do as much for you. Some wise man said, "Nothing is impossible in this world"—and it is true, for where other trusses have failed is where we have had our greatest success in many cases! Even doctors—thousands of them—have ordered for themselves and their patients. Unless your case is absolutely hopeless *do not despair.* The coupon below brings our Free Rupture Book in plain envelope. Send the coupon now.

Patented AIR-CUSHION Support Gives *Wonderful Protection*

Think of it! Here's a surprising yet simple-acting invention that helps Nature support the weakened muscles gently but securely, day and night. Thousands of grateful letters express heartfelt thanks for relief from pain and worry,—results beyond the expectations of the writers. What is this invention—how does it work? Will it help me? Get the complete, fascinating facts on the Brooks Air-Cushion Appliance—send now for *free* Rupture Book.

Cheap—Sanitary—Comfortable

Rich or poor—ANYONE can afford to buy this remarkable, LOW-PRICED rupture invention! But look out for imitations and counterfeits. The Genuine Brooks Air-Cushion Truss is never sold in stores or by agents. Your Brooks is made up, after your order is received, to fit your particular case. You buy direct at the low "maker-to-user" price. The perfected Brooks is sanitary, lightweight, inconspicuous. Has no hard pads to gouge painfully into the flesh, no stiff, punishing springs, no metal girdle to rust or corrode. It is GUARANTEED to bring you heavenly comfort and security,—or it costs you NOTHING. The Air-Cushion works in its own unique way, softly, silently helping Nature support the weakened muscles. Learn what this marvelous invention may mean to you—send coupon quick!

C. E. BROOKS, Inventor

SENT on TRIAL!

No . . . don't order a Brooks now—FIRST get the complete, revealing explanation of this world-famous rupture invention, THEN decide whether you want to try for the comfort—the wonderful degree of freedom—the security—the blessed relief thousands of men, women and children have reported. They found the answer to their prayers! And you risk nothing as the complete Brooks is SENT ON TRIAL. Surely you owe it to yourself to investigate this no-risk trial. Send for the facts now—today—hurry! All correspondence strictly confidential.

FREE! Latest Rupture Book Explains All!

SENT YOU IN PLAIN ENVELOPE **JUST CLIP and SEND COUPON ➡**

Brooks Appliance Co., 195C State St., Marshall, Mich.

PROOF!

Read These Reports on Reducible Rupture Cases

(In our files at Marshall, Michigan, we have over 52,000 grateful letters which have come to us entirely unsolicited and without any sort of payment.)

Never Loses a Day's Work in Shipyard

"A few weeks ago I received the Appliance you made for me. I put it on the afternoon I received it and wouldn't do without it now. My fellow workers notice how much better I can do my work and get around over these ships—and believe me, the work in a Navy shipyard is anything but easy. You have been a life saver to me. I never lose a day's work now. One of my buddies was ruptured on the job about two months ago. After seeing my Appliance he wants me to order him one." J. A. Comer, 1606 Green Ave., Orange, Texas.

Perfect Satisfaction in Every Way

"I am happy to report that the Appliance that I received from you more than a year ago has given perfect satisfaction in every way.

"In fact, I am not sure I will ever need another one, but I am asking you to send me the best grade as marked on the order blank, then if I should ever need it I would have it. I think I would want to use it when I go for long walks or work at heavy work of any kind, just for protection."—H. M. Herron, Mouthcard, Ky.

MAIL THIS COUPON NOW!

BROOKS APPLIANCE CO.
195-C State St., Marshall, Mich.

Without obligation, please send your FREE BOOK on Rupture, PROOF of Results, and TRIAL OFFER—all in plain envelope.

Name .....

Street .....

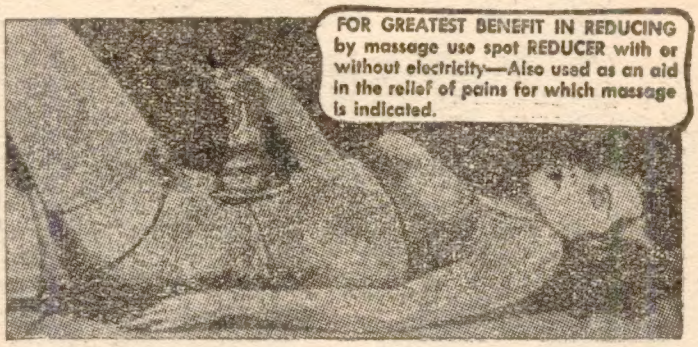
City ..... State .....

State whether for Man ☐ Woman ☐ or Child ☐

REDUCE KEEP SLIM AT HOME

WITH RELAXING, SOOTHING MASSAGE!

ELECTRIC SPOT REDUCER



FOR GREATEST BENEFIT IN REDUCING by massage use spot REDUCER with or without electricity—Also used as an aid in the relief of pains for which massage is indicated.

UNDERWRITERS LABORATORY APPROVED

TAKE OFF UGLY FAT!

Don't Stay FAT — You Can LOSE POUNDS and INCHES SAFELY without risking HEALTH

Take pounds off—keep slim and trim with Spot Reducer! Remarkable new invention which uses one of the most effective reducing methods employed by masseurs and turkish baths—MASSAGE!

With the SPOT REDUCER you can now enjoy the benefits of RELAXING, SOOTHING massage in the privacy of your own home! Simple to use—just plug in, grasp handle and apply over most any part of the body—stomach, hips, chest, neck, thighs, arms, buttocks, etc. The relaxing, soothing massage breaks down FATTY TISSUES, tones the muscles and flesh, and the increased awakened blood circulation carries away waste fat—helps you regain and keep a firmer and more GRACEFUL FIGURE!

Your Own Private Masseur at Home

When you use the Spot Reducer, it's almost like having your own private masseur at home. It's fun reducing this way! It not only helps you reduce and keep slim—but also aids in the relief of those types of aches and pains—and tired nerves that can be helped by massage! The Spot Reducer is handsomely made of light weight aluminum and rubber and truly a beautiful invention you will be thankful you own. AC 110 volts.

TRY THE SPOT REDUCER 10 DAYS FREE IN YOUR OWN HOME!

Mail this coupon with only $1 for your Spot Reducer on approval. Pay postman $8.95 plus delivery—or send $9.95 (full price) and we ship postage prepaid. Use it for ten days in your own home. Then if not delighted return Spot Reducer for full purchase price refund. Don't delay! You have nothing to lose—except ugly, embarrassing, undesirable pounds of FAT. MAIL COUPON now!

ALSO USE IT FOR ACHES AND PAINS

CAN'T SLEEP: Relax with electric Spot Reducer. See how soothing its gentle massage can be. Helps you sleep when massage can be of benefit.

MUSCULAR ACHES: A handy helper for transient relief of discomforts that can be aided by gentle, relaxing massage.

USED BY EXPERTS: Thousands have lost weight this way—in hips, abdomen, legs, arms, neck, buttocks, etc. The same method used by stage, screen and radio personalities and leading reducing salons. The Spot Reducer can be used in your spare time, in the privacy of your own room.

ORDER IT TODAY!

SPOT REDUCER CO., Dept. E-34
1025 Broad St., Newark, New Jersey

Please send me the Spot Reducer for 10 days trial period. I enclose $1, upon arrival I will pay postman only $8.95 plus postage and handling. If not delighted I may return SPOT REDUCER within 10 days for prompt refund of full purchase price.

Name .....

Address .....

City .....State .....

☐ SAVE POSTAGE—check here if you enclose $9.95 with coupon. We pay all postage and handling charges. Same money back guarantee applies.

"Tom isn't going to like this," said Sarah, twisting away.

GUN-SHY DUDE

A Powerful Rangeland Novelet

by T. C. McClary

Only Sarah Crooswaite defended that damn yankee dude, Pete Giller, and her brother wanted to give the man a square deal. But what could anyone do when the man wouldn't fight for his rights, and apparently didn't want to work?

ALL DAY LONG, dry throttling heat had surged across the singed brown landswells of the Nueces country, and now the heat began to drift and eddy; the intense brash glare of mid-day drew off as if pulled by a reata. The world was hot and dead and listless in the Crosswaite coulee, and the lusty vitality of the call that slammed down from the rim held the surprising contrast of laughter in a mausoleum.

Sarah Crooswaite lifted her head with a mixture of excitement and irritation crossing her heat-flushed face, and moved to the kitchen door wiping her hands upon the flour sack caught around her waist. There was no real horizon—the shimmering haze formed a wall of the burning land and molten brassy sky. It was

a full half minute before she made out Gus Doremus a mile up from the trail, and not bothering to ride the extra distance, driving his horse across the high rim and down a treacherous shale slide.

He rode wild and rough and recklessly, but sure in the stirrup and with his horse sure of the bit; not a man to gentle a horse and be one with it, but a rider to command its obedience to his slightest shift of weight and wish. No horse she had ever seen had ever loved Doremus, but no horse had ever feared his riding or his judgement of a risk.

He crossed the coulee floor at a long fast run, haunching his pony to a halt with forehoofs almost drumming the porch awning. The girl sniffed pointedly at this showoff, but there was grudging approval of his riding in her eye, and he grinned chestilly, "Where's that mutton-tough brother of yore's at, Sarry?"

"Tom ever hears you give him a sheep handle," she answered tartly, "and he'll make mutton out of you, friend!"

He gave a sound in his throat and chuckled, but the touch of darkness that ran under his hot charcoal burn showed the respect he gave her brother and a man's elemental consideration of the truth that might lie in her gibe.

He was built square as a brick and just as solid; his barrel-chest filled his checkered shirt and stretched it. His face was square, blunt and rough, the face of a man oblivious of any of fate's finer shadings, who saw life as pure black or white—and only from the standpoint of how it looked to him. He was a cattleman at core, and he had taken on many of the instincts and reactions of the wild longhorns that he herded.

Give him a pair of five foot horns. she thought, *and his own cows would take him for a Brahma!*

But it was the thought of a woman who was herself part and parcel of the cow country with no wish to be above it. She knew Gus Doremus inside out; she admired his stubborn tenacity, and—except for the brutal streak that ran through most range men—she liked him in spite of his pride and thick skin.

"You are sure powerful gossipy," he allowed after a time.

She shrugged and wiped back a wisp of corn yellow hair. "You know Tom well as I do...he may be patching the dam or shooting poker, middle of the night or middle of the day. Light and wait if yore minded."

"Yeah," he nodded and his gaze lingered on her with a man's personal feelings for a woman washing over the business on his mind. "Yeah," he repeated, "that is an idea." He looked suddenly mocking. "If that danged Yankee scarecrow of yore's ain't likely to blast that calliope of his in my ear!"

SHE TINTED down the full round column of her neck and her expression stiffened. "Jealous," she asked, "because a man can do something you can't?"

He gave a half angered snort and stepped out of his saddle. "Any time I need to squeal like a stuck pig to get attention, I'll ring the iron hoop for my own funeral!"

He knuckled back his hat and let the trapped sweat trickle down across his face. He stood a moment scowling as if she had thrown a personal challenge at him, as if the mere existence of Peter Giller might be something he should not tolerate.

She saw crossed pride roughen his expression and hot streaks of brutality thread his eyes, and having a woman's fear of something she might have started, she used a woman's way to quell it. She said as if the Yankee had already drifted from her thoughts, "Come in for java and tell me what you and Tom are cooking up about this drive to Ogallala."

It was Tom's idea, pure and simple; or rather, it had started as Pete Giller's idea and Tom had taken it over. Gus had even argued against it, which she well knew, but now by including him with her brother she put things in a different light. Hitch-

ing his belt he let the importance she gave him settle on him weightilly and followed her into the hot shadows of the kitchen.

She gestured at the table but he stood with bootheels braced, his broad back flat against the wall. He watched her capable movements, the effortless way she did things. She wore a simple callico housedress the heat had moulded to the firm-fleshed curves of her lusty body, and he soaked in the flowing rhythm of her motions, sensing the lasting desert heat that would be in her for a man lucky enough to get it...but never thinking that it would be a man of her own choosing.

She put pie on the table and shot him a glance, reading the unformed feelings drifting through him like crosswinds that play and then gather into a tornado. She moved quickly back to the stove, knowing men, and knowing Gus, well enough to sense what was probably coming, not wanting personal attention from him, yet stirred and drawn and stripped of her own feminine defenses by the sheer ruthless surge of his vitality.

She checked the rapid tempo of her breathing, drew herself in hand. *I can handle him!* she told herself. She turned to find him standing square behind her, and looking up into his face, knew she was wrong—knew the feeling of a trapped bird.

He took her by the shoulders, swung her without roughness but with no gentleness back against the sink. His hands dropped to her firm-muscled hips and he stood a moment looking down at her with heating eyes and lips growing full and thick. He said heavily, "You have been a belle long enough Sarry... it is time some hombre made you ring."

His head dropped and his lips pressed upon the broad bow of her mouth, but not in a lover's way—not even with wild pent up hunger in them. He kissed her as he would lay his hand upon a fine new horse, with an uncompromising demand and will to dominate it.

Her breath came furiously and she felt giddy at the surge of raw power in him, but she gave no response.

She gave him nothing but what he took, conscious with bitter irony that this was enough to suit him... it was all he wanted, and more or less would have made no difference. She was like a cow or horse to him, something he wanted and would put his brand upon, without thought or feeling for how the animal felt, and caring.

THE FAST run of a horse pulsed and grew into a drum, and he drew his lips away as the horse came into the yard. Her color was high and her breath jerking, but she said levelly, "That is Tom and he won't like this."

"To hell with Tom," he muttered, but he stepped back from her. She could see the elemental wants of a man, the cruelty and stubbornness that goes with them slamming back and forth like a shuttlecock against his healthy respect for her brother.

He growled, "Dammit, why should he mind me?" and scowled; swinging around with an edge of bad temper, he sat down with boots wrapped around the chair rungs.

She smoothed the lines from her face, steadied down, and poured his coffee as Tom swung through the door. Tom brought the smell of dust and hot leather and horse sweat, the feel of a tough day on the range with ropes burning and heat stirring up those loco ladino critters. He tossed his hat on a peg, hung up his gun, and moving to the sink to wash, wiped most of the landscape from his keen, wind whipped face upon the towel.

He sat down with a nod and shot them both the briefest of passing looks, but from instinct sensed just about how things stood. "Gus," he allowed, "when I'm away, my sister is boss of this ranch and of herself."

Gus held his coffee mug between thick-muscled, calloused hands and stared down at it. "She is smart enough and tough enough to handle that," he muttered.

"But mebbe not strong enough," Tom said. The light slashed from his permanently narrowed eyes in thin grey sheets. "I dunno. I would hate to ever find that she had to be; no man comes on this place I do not reckon as a friend."

Gus held dead still. Tom was not a large man as the range riders went, but he had the striking violence of a rattlesnake when aroused.

Tom gave one nod as if the matter were spoken and forgotten and looked at his sister. "I'll take a sandwich, Sarry," he said, and snagged out makings to build a cigaret.

"Gus," he grunted on a different note, "I've about decided on that drive for Ogallala."

Gus raised his eyes with quick interest, but beneath it, the girl read his relief that there would be no trouble. He was rough and tough and there was not a yellow fiber in him, but his reactions were primitive as an animal's. He could still remember the trouncing Tom had given him when they were twelve, and it was never far from his thoughts that Tom was the real boss of this range.

Gus said, "Well, I still say it is a long drive with a heap of risk and if it was me alone, I'd sell to Ad Spaugh nearer by. But if you aim to head the drive, count me in."

"I couldn't keep you out!" Tom grinned and smoothed off the last raw edge of his earlier warning. "Why boy, you'd be having blackgall and buck fever was any other hombre to ramrod this drive!"

A rough grin spread over the other's features. "So, yore finally coming out with who's best man on this range? Well, you have picked the right man, son, to hold a pack of wild ornery ranchers in line!"

"I'm not fretting much on the ranchers," Tom said with considerations. "What I am stewing on is handling a mixed herd on a dry trail in this weather."

Gus gave a snort and tossed his head. "One bawl out of them wild doggies and I will dog the master down and break his danged neck with my bare hands!"

"That is what has got me stewing," Tom allowed. "I don't figure this for a moving rodeo or a running feud with cows; I aim to get me enough beef there to make a profit."

"Don't worry on that, boy!" Gus growled chestilly. "You just ride point and pick yore trails and leave the herd to me!"

TOM GAVE him a long, thoughtful look. "A cow on this range," he stated, "ain't worth a plugged dollar, but them on trail will be worth thirty dollars a head, and let's not forget it."

Gus chuckled tolerantly and winked over Tom's shoulder. "Old Worry Wart here!" he laughed at Sarah. "Mebbe he figures the rest of us have so much dinero we don't need money."

The shrill piping of a flute drifted down on the cooling airs of evening. Gus scowled and dragged to his feet. "There's that danged Yankee calliope," he grunted, "squealing loud enough to start a stampede!"

The girl's head lifted. She said stiffly, "It isn't so bad somebody can think of something besides fighting and faro and fandangoes!"

Gus shot her a mocking look. "You mean that forlorn fiddlefooted fool?" he chuckled. "Well, Sarry, even a damyankee's got to think of something. One thing is sure, he don't think of fighting or working like us common clay!"

Her brother got to his feet before she answered. He said to Gus, "I'll ride you on a piece."

Gus said, "Fair enough," but it was clear he was miffed that his acid wit had been cut off and that Tom gave that damned useless foreign drifter free run of the place.

She watched the two roll out with their truculent, saddle-stiffened gaits and shortly sashay from the yard. Day's heavy pressing heat had broken and was slowly peeling off the land; evening's obliquely slanting rays of light held a color and clarity that held time suspended.

Chapter Two

THE shrill piercing notes of Peter Giller's flute grew stronger, reaching down with sudden directness from the rim. He came ambling his pony down the side trail of the coulee, a man who looked gaunt and sparse and shy and self-effacing even at a distance.

How could he be yellow? she asked herself out of stinging knowledge of the general opinion of that rough-shod range. *Four years of solid bloody fighting in the cavalry.. he is just dead weary of fighting and of trouble!*

She had defended him against all and sundry ever since he drifted in there, but lately she was defending him to herself, and was too honest not to recognize the reason. He had been in the Nueces country two years now, and except for herself had not made a friend. That might be accounted for by the fact he was a Yankee...the bitterness of the Texans was a lasting and abiding hatred. But other Yankees had come in there and beaten or gentled the high feelings down, and had found work or business or set up ranches. But Peter Giller was still a dirt-poor pilgrim, whose home-patched boots and saddle were beginning to look skiddleskaddled, and whose threadbare clothes had a decided look of hand-me-downs.

He rode in, sitting shy and self conscious in the saddle, but the piercing, stirring, skirling of his flute held bursting feelings that fell like gentlest rain and then rolled like thunder through her emotions, lifting him out of his poverty stricken class and giving him a quality of bigness.

Half-starved, lonely, hated and sneered at and without a friend, she thought with compassion. *Why does he stay here and put up with it?*

But she already knew the answer and it was there beating like wings against her unbidden feelings for him; a flush spread with sundown's gentlest color down her neck and out onto her rounded shoulders.

She turned back into the house to rustle some extra-sized vittles, smiling; he would eat one sandwich or one piece of pie big enough to stagger a bullock, but would never accept a second helping or a real meal, even of leftovers.

The music swelled and stopped and after a space took up again, low, but nearer by; she knew he was hunkered against the house wall on the stoop, too modest to take the privilege of a chair, although he was not range bred and hunkering was not natural to him. She put his vittles onto a tray, but stood inside the door listening, letting the music

strike through its melancholy and trying to fathom its haunting quality.

He paused, idling on the play of meaningless bars and notes, and she stepped out into evening's amber light, slanting off the still brassy sky. He looked up with his apologetic sober smile and came erect, but his thoughts were out on the brown singed, rolling prairie, and he muttered as if it were a deep and important wrongness to him, "Not a solitary spot of green or spreading tree to relieve the harshness!"

She put the tray down on a cowhide table. "We're almost bordering the sandtank country," she told him. "What can a body do about it?"

"You know that scrubby draw of of mine," he told her. "I'd put a big brimming pool in there by stopping up the seep. Not for the stock, but just for folks to look at and sit by when they drifted in, tired and hot and raw-edged of a summer evening."

She smiled at his enduring strangeness to the country's nature. He was still thinking of his New England pastures. "Pete," she murmured, "this country is a frying pan; the sun would dry up yore pool in no time."

"No, I been studying on that," he answered. "There was a natural pool in my draw once, but it's filled in and corked up a spring. I'd dig it out and plant trees and brush to shade it, and in time you could even grow flowers there, Sarah, like you've never managed over here."

SHE GAVE him a quick, sharp look, catching from his unconscious statement deep-rooted thoughts of her that he would not say to her face. He had thought of her in his own back-country draw; he had pictured her sitting and watching sundown mirrored in his dream-pool and growing a flower garden in its cool shade. He had not only dreamed about it; he had worked out the practical details to his own belief and satisfaction. She listened to him tell about his plans with a bitter sweetness in her, thinking that he meant so well, and in another country might have made the grade. But this was a tough range respecting only a man's drive and guts and wits and toughness; they would never give a shy damned-yankee a chance unless he could beat respect out of the whole country.

A full warmth crept up into her throat at the serious optomism of his plans. She looked out quickly at the rolling spokes of sundown, thinking of what a man's kind thought or gentle nature meant to a woman against the drab, harsh monotony of that fierce burning land. It was the men who ran the ranches, but it was the cattle who ran the men; their moods and thoughts and habits were all tuned to the raw wild ways of the ladino. Not even her own brother Tom had ever thought of a pool for his own enjoyment...when he thought of a pool or shade trees it was a thing to benefit his cattle, and even prime cattle were worth only three dollars a head in that country ...if you could find a buyer.

She thought of that and she said gently, "Pete, the kind of ranch yore talking of would cost a heap of sounding money."

He nodded agreement. "Real gold and silver. But I wouldn't worry myself to death building a big spread for these loco scrawny longhorns. I'd bring in Hereford and Black Angus stock even if I couldn't afford a good Brahma, and I'd double my beef weight and breed brood critters that didn't go plumb berserk every time a storm comes up. Or just for no reason."

"The boys say that fat dude stock would never stand up in this country," she pointed out.

"Then cross it," he suggested. "You'll see; they'll come to it. They laughed about Ad Spaugh trailing his beef way up to a railhead to get decent prices, but now little by little they're all coming to it."

He made a gesture. "What's the sense of hundred-thousand acre ranches and thousands of cattle when you ain't got cash enough to buy fattening feed for them, or even a new blanket?"

She pushed the tray toward him with a woman's fond smile brightening the clean forthright beauty of her face. Listening to Pete, alone, she could almost believe his dreaming. It took the other men's sneers and contemptuous talk to bring back her realization of how little he had actually accomplished, of his lack of push and grit. Yet in his quiet way he showed surprising streaks of gumption and hard sense at times. He had found and trailed and gentled one of the wildest colts in the back country. Devil, son of the Red King. The range laughed about his reedy, wailing flute, but he could make sounds on it a person could not hear at all, he claimed, and either he could or he had some other trick, for she had seen him call his horse in from more than a mile across the range. Even her brother scorned Pete as shiftless, but it had been Pete who rode five hundred miles to see Ad Spaugh and brought back the accurate reports of the troubles and payoff of the first big herd trailed out of Texas. And it had been Pete who saw the advantage of running beef clean through to Ogallala if a man could hold his herd in one piece that far, for all of Tom's denial that it had been Pete's daydreaming that seeded the idea in him.

SUNDOWN flung its brilliant banners across the sky and she moved inside to get supper ready while he hunkered on the stoop again playing softly; the rise and fall of the flute's plaintive cry called to her heart against all those barriers of her caste and code, and the harsh opinion of the range.

She caught the drum of her brother's hard gallop reaching up the coulee and from the faltering of his tunes knew the Yankee heard it, felt the conflict in him of whether to drag weight now and avoid embarrassment, or whether that would look shamed, and he should wait. While he was making up his mind, her brother put in at the corral, and Pete Giller hunkered in silent discomfort out in the rising tide of shadows, simply waiting to show his face.

Tom spur-dragged from the corral, step thrusting, forceful with decision, but still keyed by the hard day on the range. He stopped on the edge of the stoop and stared at Pete. "Heard," he allowed, "old man Price offered you a job roughbreaking but you wouldn't take it."

Pete said apologetically, "I couldn't do that work, Tom; I couldn't beat and break them poor critters thataway!"

Tom let a breath rip through his nostrils. "Yore business," he said after a space. "But them poor critters are tough as rawhide and it takes a man to sit one of them two minutes."

Pete Giller looked down at his flute and turned it. "They break 'em powerful harsh," he said. "I just couldn't do it thataway."

"Ain't going to help yore standing on the range," Tom told him frankly. "And it ain't going to put any fat on yore stomach."

Pete made a dismal gesture. "What can a man do? He can't change his nature."

"No," Tom agreed, "but he can change his landscape. If it was me and I drifted into a country I couldn't lick and couldn't stomach, I'd drift out pronto before the country decided it couldn't stomach me."

Peter Giller looked out at the sundown and his lean, gaunt, rockhewn face held a desperate containment. "I'll do all right," he said on a tight note. "I ain't asking nothing of the country; nobody even wanted

that draw I took, and anybody could have had the wild stock I've done caught before me."

"Well, yore business," Tom repeated. He built a smoke and in that space, Pete found awkward excuse to take leave of them, calling good-by to Sarah, and drifted out into night's thickening sea of velvet darkness. The girl came to the door to watch him sink into the shadows, eyes wide with feeling for him, mouth a little parted with compassion.

"Tom," she murmured out into the stoop's shadows, "that was really stinking! Why did you have to hurt his pride like that?"

"If he can't stand to hear the truth, let him hang out somewhere else," he grunted.

"Where else would he go?" she asked. "We're about the only real friends he has."

He gave a snort of irritation. "You mean you are, and I am having to hold the bag for it! He'd have been whipped out of the country a year ago but for me, and damned if he wouldn't have plumb starved to death but for you. He's been living on free vittles so long he's getting to expect you should ring a dinner bell!"

"Aw, Tom!" she cried, but hurt more than angered. "That isn't fair or like you! He's never taken a decent meal in all this time, even when you weren't around, and he's never been too busy to do an errand or a chore."

"You can say that again!" he rasped. "He ain't ever too busy for fiddlefaddle!"

She turned onto the stoop. Her face caught the fading light still filtering through the piling shades of night. "He had enough sense to figure there might be something to trailing herds up to railhead," she challenged bluntly, "and ride five hundred miles to see Ad Spaugh and find out the truth. And it's only on account of his ride that yore aiming to make a drive to Ogallala."

TOM MOVED uncomfortably in his boots, rammed his fist through the air with a man's gesture of anger. He growled, "Dang it, Sarah, I am not rawhiding him just for being a Yankee and a saddlebum; I'll even give him credit for ideas; and he *is* a clean-cut hombre or he'd not have the run of this place when I'm away. But he is downright shiftless, and war or no war, he is rabbit-shy of trouble. He ain't even got the pride to come back at his hazers. And I am damned tired of being ribbed about a friend who ain't my friend but yore's, and an hombre without the sand to get a job or stand on his own!"

"Nobody'd give him a decent chance if he got a job," she breathed heavily. "You know it well as I do ...the whole range would knock off to make it tough and haze him; the boys have been waiting for the chance ever since he came. Anyway, he can't work for another man any more than you could, Tom, and you wouldn't do it if you starved!"

He moved to the front of the stoop where the lingering twilight splashed upon his rugged face. He poked a blunt, rope-calloused finger hard into a post. He was scowling in the way of a man who takes pride in being fair and generous and it was clear he did not want to be thought mean or narrow by his sister.

He growled angrily, "Doggone it, Sarry, I half liked the whacky galoot when he first came. But this is a tough range where a man has to prove his mettle, and you have got to face the picture. He has been here two years and he is still wearing the same boots and saddle he rode in with; except for gentling that wild colt, he ain't done one worthwhile thing. I don't reckon he *is* downright yellow, but he don't want to fight, and he won't prove himself any other way."

"And the town's talking and has roiled you?" she asked dulcetly.

"Yes, damn it—if you have to know, that's it! I'm the goat so you can hear a little music, Sarah, and I am damned sick of having to stand up for a man whose worthless. What

do you see in him anyway? Why don't you send him on his way?"

She spread her hands. She swallowed and looked out with a woman's torn feelings at the last dusty glows of sundown. "You wouldn't know what a little gentleness means to a woman in this burning country, Tom. He doesn't do any harm; he has never even made a personal remark or brushed against my hand."

Her brother looked at her with frank surprise. "Then what in hell is he hanging around for?"

She gripped the rail. She dropped her face into deep shadow, but he could hear the deep rise and fall of her breathing. "Mebbe he means to build a spread," she murmured. "He has been talking of bringing in some brood stock."

"*Talk!*" he snorted. "What's he know about cattle? There ain't no money here to begin with, and he has got less than any. The best of us are damned near bankrupt. Where's he going to get money to start with?"

"He'll make some out of the drive, won't he?" she asked. "He's gathered better than a hundred mavericks good enough to sell, he says."

Her brother's profile grew hard as rock. "The boys have dealt him out," he grunted.

She turned square onto him. Angry indignation was a shine deep in her eyes. "Tom...you'd let them do that?"

"What can I do?" he grated.

"It is yore drive," she told him sharply. "They'll do what you say, or so help me Hannah, you'll know the reason for it! This is yore own decision, Tom...don't weasel on it."

He stared at the solid darkness of the hills. After a long space he said on a grim note, "This is a hell of a thing you are asking me, Sarah...to befriend a man I don't respect! All right, I will deal him in, but I will not baby him."

He pivotted slowly and studied the pale ovale of her face against the darkness. "But if he quits or shirks or can't prove up, I aim to see he stays in Ogallala."

Fairness was in him, but it was harsh and ruthless, and she felt the

solid impact of his decision. The boys were a hard bunch, a rough bunch, and this was going to be a rough, tough drive that would test the best men's guts and wits and coolheadedness. It was no place for a dude at best, and particularly for a Yankee dude, already scorned and held in contempt as a weakspined, useless drifter.

Her brother was slowly shaking his head. "You drew a bad card, Sarah, and that is a four flush that yore holding. Pete won't get through as far as Ogallala."

Her eyes opened into accusing circles. "You aim to let the boys haze him off!"

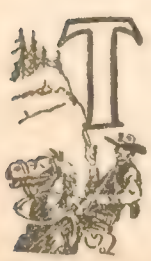
"No," he told her, and Tom's word was like the mint. "I'll see there ain't no anthills, no ropings, no sidewinders put in his boots. But he will get sore or hurt or shamed, or just plain proddy at the heavy work, and he will sell his cows to whoever will buy them and ride off in a quit."

She pulled the deep breath of a woman risking all of her dreams and hopes in loyalty to a man she was not herself fully sure of. "Tom," she said, "I'll bet my hand."

He gave a smile of appreciation for her loyalty. "Then I'll call it and stand to lose," he said. "If this fluting Yankee of yore's sticks through to Ogallala, I will build the house you want and give him a first rate bull to start a spread."

She stood absolutely still a moment with her neck scalding at his reading of her heart's secrets, then with a sob of gratitude and closeness, came forward against his rawhide-muscled chest.

Chapter Three



THIS WAS the first trail drive out of the upper valley and the news that Pete meant to throw in his hundred head drew an instant mixture of scornful humor and raw suspicion. Gus Doremus voiced the latter when he grunted roughly, "Which one of us supplied him with them critters?"

"I've already run over them," Tom said; "they were mavericks all right." He grinned. "And he musta gone mountain climbing for 'em! Gus, I don't reckon even you'd own up to 'em!"

Pete's cattle were just about as wild and tough and poorly as even that range had ever seen. They looked like mountain goats with five-foot horns—wild, spooky ladinos, without an ounce of fat on the lot of them.

The cattle were trailed as one herd, regardless of ownership, all owners and riders holding the same status under the iron authority of Tom Crosswaite. But there were certain permissable tricks if a man could get away with them. If he could find a little richer graze or better water at feedtime or layover, he tried to connive a bunch of his own critters to that spot.

Of course, a man did not get caught at it if he could help it for the pure reason that if others saw what he was up to, they'd come butting in on his cutting cooperations, scattering his bunch and mixing it thoroughly with other cattle. This made the trick pretty difficult and considerable respect went to the man whose cattle were "lucky" enough to end up with the best graze and water.

It was something of a blow to the outfit to have to admit at the end of two weeks that Pete's cattle were finding choice positions almost daily, and in one solid, unbroken herd at that. Tom had counted the semi-isolated cattle a dozen times, and every danged time he spotted a full hundred, all with Pete Giller's vented ears.

Gus Doremus, spoiling for the chance to give Pete trouble, had watched like a coyote with a rabbit in clear view. But the means by which Pete managed to gather and cut his particular bunch out of the big herd was an utter mystery. Obligingly, he rode station wherever he was needed, and more often

The daily round-up made for short tempers.

than not, rode off by himself when they made night camp without even wandering through the herd. Yet invariably his cattle bunched and drifted plumb for some unseen spot of greener grass, or to a hole of clearer water if it was handy.

The result was that Pete's cows were steadily putting on a little weight and in better temper for it, while most of the others were losing their pound or two a day. Gus Doremus growled angrily, "By gawd-amighty, take a man whose nothing better'n a saddle bum, and he rides with the devil's luck! Look at him... he goes drifting off first chance he gets to play with that damned flute, and his cattle line cut right straight for some coulee knee deep in grass the rest of us don't even know is there yet!"

"Mebbe he's got 'em trained, Gus," Tom drawled mockingly.

Gus flung him a look of contemptuous anger. "That no'count, crawling, shiftless, Yankyella son?" he snorted. "He don't even dast ride in amongst his own cows to fan 'em out!"

"I ain't noticed he had to," Tom pressed him with rough humor.

THERE WAS more than joking to this and Tom pondered it. The boys had been dead set to rawhide Pete out of the drive from the first, and failing to get a rise out of him with their acid taunts, they had taken every opportunity to crowd his cattle into bad position. Invariably, if he was riding point or flank, his cows ate the whole herd's dust most of the evening and came to the bedground last for water and for grazing, and needing water twice as badly for their treatment.

The boys grinned with their hard, rough humor and waited for Pete's stock to gaunt or Pete to roil and

break under this arrogant contempt, and there were bets that by the crossing of the Platee, he would be hooked or run down in driving his own late-coming cattle to decent water and bed ground. But the boys were missing something that began to filter into Tom...each time they crowded Pete's herd back into tail place, the cows came up late and double-thirsted from eating dust and it was their owner with that damned soft-spoken, crying and wailing flute of his that led them off to the water that they craved. And he was winning a hold over those wild loco critters...damned if he wasn't gentling them...such as he could never have mastered them with raw edged temper and hot fury in his voice, and they were coming to look to him like a pack of dogs to their feeder.

Mebbe not so dumb, Tom thought and held his previous judgement in suspension, watching now to see if this shy, easy-going, dreamy, fluting dude knew what he was up to, or if he was just fiddlefoot and chucklehead, running in luck he had not figured and did not understand. It made a big difference in a heap of ways beside herding cattle; a man who could play possum out of smartness under the rawhiding Pete was getting and not show his hand in temper, might be playing possum in other ways, able to face and judge his own deficiencies, and biding his time until he got the breaks to prove himself a man.

One thing was clear; Pete didn't know much about cow country. But he had worked those scrawny, passed-up mavericks of his to make the best of them possible out in that dry brush country where he'd nested, and with nobody to see him and put him on his mettle, that was not the way of a downright shiftless man.

That much was beginning to stand in Pete's favor, but the very fact that he might have unsuspected good qualities made the contrast of his meekness sharper. Three weeks had passed now and drought lay along the trail and strain and overwork was beginning to pressure through the men, turning them raw and sullen and their humor truculent and biting. Night camp had turned into the gathering of a snapping, snarling pack with blame and criticism sharp, and violence quick to rise.

It was Tom's glacial will and Gus's smashing fist that held the bunch in hand, but the only gentling temper dulling influence was coming to be the tunes Pete skirled out from his flute. Maybe he was really shy; maybe he was just plain afraid of being near trouble as Gus claimed, but after supper he would usually ride out to a hill, and the men's biting truculence would smooth out as he played. They were coming to need him and gentle under him like his cattle, and unconsciously, acceptance of his quiet modest ways was growing. Men began to find things good about him, and even to regard him in a friendly way.

This was something Gus hadn't figured, and now the fact that other men liked someone he held in contempt was a burning goad upon his pride and something his vanity could not tolerate. He saw the change in Tom, the readiness to give this damned Yankee the benefit of doubt and a fair chance to prove himself, and the ramrod's callous scorn turned to a corroding jealous hate. He could have smashed every bone in Pete's body with his knuckles; he could have pulled him limb from limb with his hands. But there was no challenge in the man physically and there would be no deep satisfaction in victory. What Gus felt he had to do would prove him gutless, witless and phoney...he had to ride him and insult him and break him so that he would bawl and crawl and quit of his own doing, show himself for a snivelling whelp who had used Tom for protection, his sister for vittles, and his music to win friendship he could not gain upon his own feet as a man.

THEY WERE nearing the Platte with the prairie heat lying flat and throttling upon them clean through the nights and with tension building to an explosive point through animals and men alike.

Men's cheeks were gaunt and instant challenge was a raw look in their eyes, and strain had jerked their mouths into lines like twisted wire. But hardest of any, the heat was hitting the damned Yankee, and now vicious pleasure was a bright coal of light beneath the smoldering hatred of the ramrod's eyes; there was a brutal malice in the chores he picked for Pete to do, and the contempt he threw at him across the camp fire.

He picked the night Pete came in hot with fever and coughing with a whole day's dust of riding pickup to reach Pete's flute and taunt him, "It's the wail of this damned thing that is spooking up the herd. Yankee, I figure the doggies have had enough of this night screeching and the way to be sure you don't get chuckleheaded and start 'em in a stampede is to bust this stick to kindling wood and throw it in the fire."

It was hazing, pure and simple, but Pete Giller was in no condition to recognize it; his face went grey beneath his fever flush and hot wind burn and something wild as fright came into his eyes. He was filled with panic, and Gus smelled it. His lips peeled back with cruel enjoyment of this unexpected victory.

He held the flute between his ham-sized fists and slowly flexed it. "Yessir, this ain't ever made anything better than a squeal, but it is going to make me some mighty good coffee," he grated, and his fists made a twisting turn as if to break it.

Pete came at him like a striking sidewinder, a glint of silver in his hand. Somebody rasped hoarsely, "Watch that knife!" and Tom bolted up to come between them. Gus stood stock still, watching Pete's charge with faint surprise, with a wicked and gloating anger rising through his expression.

"Why you white-livered rat!" he breathed with sudden vindictive savagery, and moved with remarkable speed for a man his size. "Why, gawdamighty, I'll teach you to pull a knife on me...it won't be yore flute, it will be yore face I fry!"

Violence and hatred came up through him like a wind, and he stood ready to break the Yankee's arm and take his knife...a bull of a man who had fought for sheer brute pleasure all his life and who knew every trick and figured this like taking candy from a kid. Pure mayhem ripped across his face and he blasted a breath of unholy anticipation.

Tom's gun butt slammed behind his ear and dropped him as Wart Clee sprang and rolled, taking Pete's legs out from under him. Gus dropped like a sack and lay unmoving. Pete hit hard enough to knock the breath and wildness out of him, and after an instant, lurched up shamed and gasping.

DEAD, TENSE silence hung through the other men. Tom's gaze came at him like a pair of silver bullets.

Pete sucked a deep breath and made a gesture of his hands. "I shouldn't have pulled the knife," he admitted.

He spoke without thinking, the apology and admission springing from a man's abject shame and humility, and they might have given him credit at least for honesty. But his voice held a Yankee twang and they were reminded of the not long dead bitter conflict and what Yankee carpet-baggers had done to raid Tex-

as since the war. Their eyes were hard, and now they froze. Somebody spit his contempt and another man turned away with fiery scorn.

Tom picked up the flute and handed it to Pete. He said on a flat, metallic note, "I reckon you'd best ride herd tonight and give Gus time to cool."

Pete took the flute without raising his face. Nobody spoke for a full half minute. Then Wart Clee said, "Kinda sorry he had to pull a trick like that; I was getting to like him in a way."

"What would you expect from a drifting saddlebum?" Riordon grunted, then swung his gaze on Tom. "No meaning any offense to you, Tom," he added.

Tom's lips compressed and his brow furrowed. "Gus shouldn't have rawhided him that hard," he grunted, "but no man has a right to draw a knife on one of his own outfit."

He signalled for water to dowse Gus with and stood with his boots spaced and his head bowed, staring at the fire. "Except for the knife, I'd have respected that temper in him," he said somberly. He sucked a deep lungfull of air and expelled it and turned to run a cold grey gaze across them. "Well, I reckon Gus made him show that he is yellow and harum-scarum, but he still signed up with us and if he sticks it, I aim to see he rides into Ogallala."

Wart muttered, "There ain't going to be no trouble, even from Gus; he is licked and crawled and he jist ain't worth bothering about."

Riordon dropped his head with agreement. "That about sizes it up, but tell him to eat and sleep at his own fire hereafter, Tom."

Chapter Four

THE whole outfit left Pete strictly alone after that. Not a man spoke to him except Tom, who now gave him his daily orders, briefly, curtly, glacially, but roiled by a man's irritation and puzzlement at finding a weakness in a man that was not fully explainable. Had Pete been the wild kind, he could have understood it, or even if he were the sneaky or bitter and vindictive sort. But it wasn't in keeping to pull a knife over a damned flute, even after his unmerciful hazing and not seeing the rough joke in it. When a man meek and quiet as Pete drew a knife or gun, it meant a killing anger in him, and even had Gus actually broken and burned the flute, it was a thing not worth a killing.

He waited for Pete to come crawling with some excuse or defensive explanation, but Pete took the frosting in somber silence...he made no try to excuse his action, he made no bid for pity. It was the final note with a wrong ring...a man with a bad streak in him would try to prove himself right; a man plumb yellow, who had been flurried or goaded into boldness, would feel sorry for himself and make a play for a kindly tolerance or understanding—or he would sneak out some night in burning shame.

The whole incident was out of line clean through, and it stuck in Tom's craw like a bitter taste he could not swallow and could not spit out. Either the man was no good at all, or he had hidden qualities Sarah had sensed and there was some decent explanation for this, but the picture did not balance either way. The uncertainty struck at Tom's sense of judgement and of fairness and bothered him; now with the heat of contempt dying out in other men, he could sense the same bother in them.

But he had a worry of a more serious kind. This was the first drive to Ogallala and they were blazing brand fresh trail. For two days of blazing heat they had failed to find water and all of the third day the herd was restless and balky, keyed and growing wild with thirst, the cows tossing their heads with the whites of their eyes growing, and their tails twitching as they smelled at the dry winds. Gus was riding ten miles ahead on point and had sent

back word that by driving through for two hours after sundown they could water and bed down at the Platte, and all afternoon they had hustled the herd along a wedge of highland, bordered on each side by sheer cliffs.

Then at sundown dust smoked up ahead, and Gus came in at a dead full run, face black with anger and eyes pools of fury. The Platte lay dead ahead, all right, but after three hours of idling along the upper banks he had dropped down to the river to water his horse and found the whole stretch of riverbed quicksand without a by-pass.

Men gathered to hear this and studied the ragged tempered herd with grim expressions, and their loss of respect for the ramrod was clear. "What in hell were you doing on the upper banks all this time?" Riordon demanded sharply. "Picking flowers, or did you run in with some squaw?"

The ramrod swung a face filled with venom. "Who in hell would figure five solid miles of quicksand with no by-pass?" he demanded.

"Any hombre," Riordon snapped curtly, "riding point should have the brains to find out!"

THE TWO breasted each other with eyes glowing and truculence hung between them like a heat storm ready to explode. Tom shouldered his horse in between them, growling, "This ain't no time for tempers! We've got no time to turn the herd back over this broken trail tonight; but a turn of wind and those thirsted doggies smell water, and we're in for sure hell's fire!"

Wart Clee said, "There was a draw down the east bluff a few miles back didn't look too stiff for trailing."

Tom gave a blast of breath. "With broken ground between, gullies crisscrossing that draw, night coming on, and dry clouds coming with it, and more than likely thunder and fireworks! That would make a sweet combination to drive a gaunted, thirsted herd right smack along a couple of miles of bluff."

He was sorer than hell at Gus Doremus' stupidity, but there was

132 Full Pages - Bigger

and Better Than Ever

★ *featuring* ★

THE RELUCTANT GRIDDER

Powerful Novel of
Fighting Courage

by Bill Erin

Plus Many Other Stories

All Complete

SUPER SPORTS

December issue now on sale

nothing to be gained in censure now. Vaguely, he noted Pete sitting on the far outskirts of the crowd in grim humility, saw him lift his reins as if he meant to ride in and offer some thought. Then the contempt they held him in occurred to him; his shoulders slumped, rekindled shame, and his rein hand dropped back to his pommel.

That was something Tom noted from mere habit, and it did not force itself through the grave problems on his mind. Sundown was putting its last blaze of glory across the sky and they were trapped on the wedge of highland with dust clouds rolling toward the river and promising a pitch black night. One smell of water, one clap of thunder or strike of lightning, and that herd was going to be off to kingdom come, either piling over the bluffs, or stampeding toward the smell of water and spilling pellmell down the Platte banks into quicksand. And that herd represented damned near every dollar in the home valley.

He shot Gus a bleak look and said harshly, "We'll bed right here and try to hold them. There wouldn't be a chance in hell of herding them back and down through that tangled draw after dark."

Riders fanned out to do the task they knew, not needing orders, but showing their anger at Gus Doremus by not even consulting the ramrod. Pete alone remained, watching Tom and waiting for instructions. Tom disregarded him, his attention taken in studying the herd and land from a ridge before night's tide of darkness swept over them.

But Gus Doremus' burning pride and hot discomfort exploded in a brute's elemental need to see somebody worse off than himself. "You, you damn Yankee!" he roared out. "Ride herd at the front of these damned doggies and see if you've got spunk enough to hold yore section!"

Pete's jaw angled at the ramrod's accompanying expletives, but his shoulders tightened with self-containment and he swung his pony forward along the trail line.

Dusk raced over them as they brought the edgy critters to a stand with trouble. Dust hung in the explosive heat turning the air harsh and choking, and the dry storm began to put on fireworks in the distance. The low wind died and the cattle would not bed, but stood erect and nervous, sniffing of the burned-out air and all through the herd small bunches of cattle were stirring restlessly, not grazing, but moving about without rhyme or reason.

THE NIGHT turned pitch; clouds shut out the stars, and berserk danger drifted off the herd with a raw sharp smell. All around it riders were singing and trying to quiet the cattle into bedding down, but there was no quieting of that crazing thirst, and there was constant, treacherous movement all through the herd now. Somewhere overhead the moon broke through for a short space, and showed the clouds drifting back from the river; Tom circled the herd at a dead run, cursing, but giving men their orders in case the wind dropped down carrying the smell of soaked up water.

He haunched his pony when he identified Pete's solid block of shadow, and after a space of embattled pride, called out gruffly, "Pete, gol dang it, get that noise stick of yore's tuning and see if it helps! These critters ain't going to stand at this end...they're proddy and ready to move even if they don't spook."

He had just finished when a restless stir ran like the sound of wind through the whole herd, and then that terrible sound to a cattleman's ears, the muttering of a herd tensing up for a breakout, began and rose steadily into a low roar.

"Gawdamighty help us if one thing spooks 'em!" Tom rasped harshly. "Surer than hell, even if that don't happen, they will catch the smell of water ahead by morning and streak out for it."

Pete said, "Tom..." hesitantly and stopped and then cleared his throat and said more forcibly, "Tom, you know danged well you can't hold 'em

with that roar growing. Let me cut my herd out and start it moving back for that draw as pacemakers and with luck the others will follow."

The rancher stared at him through the sooty darkness. He laughed harshly. "How in hell you aim to find yore bunch in this dark?"

"I'll call 'em," Pete said; "I can call 'em with my flute."

"Mebbe you can. Mebbe it would work," Tom speculated, but then the cockeyed futility of it stamped out his hope. "But they couldn't hear a steamboat whistle over that growl, and last I saw of yore critters, I'd guess them damned near the middle."

"I'll find 'em," Pete repeated and moved his horse and Tom strained his eyes to see which side the the sea of tossing horns and solid shadow the Yankee dude was taking, but the vague blob of his silhouette vanished in the middle.

"Hi, you gol danged ignorant greenhorn fool!" Tom yelled after

Tom was thinking of Sarah now; he knew he'd never be able to face her if the Dude were caught in a stampede...

him, but Pete had already been swallowed by the growling herd and he was moving deeper into it playing a queer, tuneless tune on his flute.

Tom cussed, but there was nothing he could do; already the piercing wail of that queer music was sinking into the herd's rising growl. He swung his horse and moved along to Riordon's station, and the weathered rancher called out with gruff anger, "We ain't going to have much herd left, but some of us will be fine greasespots by sunup! Get the tone of that growl?"

"I get it and I've got a damned fool man roaming around inside there and he thinks I sent him in there!" Tom rasped.

Riordon rode toward him. "No man in this outfit would be that damned-fool!" he said.

Tom blasted a saw-edge note of grim laughter. "The yellow-belly," he answered dryly. "The damned gutless, Yankee dude!"

"Gawdamighty!" Riordon muttered. "He know what he's doing?"

"I dunno," Tom rasped with temper. "But if he gets stampeded that dumb son Gus is going to answer to me before I have to answer to my sister!"

Riordon listened to the growl and shook his head with range-tough realism. "Then you better find him, friend; I wouldn't give that loco dude more than ten minutes."

HE FELT OF his gun and tested its slip. Lightning was glinted off five thousand horns, and now at the far side of that dark fluid sea of shadow, cattle began to soak up electricity that snapped from the tips of their horns like waving blue wires against the darkness. The feel of dropping wind came from overhead, and Riordon said grimly, "We'd best get outside the horn; they're milling now and they are going to bust out like a floodhead!"

Tom gave a growl and lifted his reins to swing his horse, then held the animal checked and stood up in the stirrups. Some movement too vague to define was taking place in the herd: something so uncertain that maybe he caught it only by sheer animal sense.

Then a growling, tail-twitching master right in front of him stopped its movement and its growl and turned to listen; and after a space of uncertainty, switched clean around and shouldered through its own herd, and began to amble backward from the river. They sat there, frozen, watching three small bunches turn like this; then as suddenly as it started, the herd's berserk growl stopped, and shortly, waves of solid shadow and those waving blue streaks of electricity were moving backward toward the draw through the deep darkness.

Tom muttered with a choked voice, "Damn! Gol dang me, but he went rode smack into that hairtrigger hell and found his own herd and they are leading!"

He let out a deep-chested whoop and pounded off at full run to set trail, and at dawn he came out at the bottom of the draw and waited up for that loco, wailing, tuneless music to come up with him. Pete came out through the spread of pearl and amber light bringing his tunes out of that hollow stick, and Tom fell alongside of him, bending back across the rolling lowlands for the river.

He rode for better than five miles in wrapped silence, and then unable to unravel the riddle on his mind, he asked abruptly, "Pete, how come you went so berserk as to try a killing over a danged flute? You ain't weak and you ain't bad; you sure ain't proddy, or you'd never have rode into a booming stampede cool as ice and turned it."

The Yankee dude took the flute down from his lips and studied it, and the first rays of sunlight showed his ears growing beet red. After a long space he said, "Tom, there just ain't no decent apology a man could make for that—but Gus had no right fooling with this flute and he knew it."

The rancher looked around with intent curiosity in his quiet grey eyes. "Something special only you two knew about?"

"Well, him and yore sister," Pete wheezed shyly. "See, it was this flute got her to knowing me when I first drifted down there, and he knew it—was kidding her about it that first night."

A suddenly hard light slashed off Tom's eyes. This gave a personal value to that flute that changed things, and it made any horseplay with that music stick almost an affront to his sister.

Then his wide lips jerked with humor and he demanded, "It wasn't that gawd-awful tuneless music you been playing that took her fancy?"

"Oh that," Pete answered. "That ain't even music; it comes out with the notes a human can't hear, but that's sweet music and means water and fresh graze to my loco critters."

Tom shook his head and grinned and turned in the saddle to look back at the long red-brown river of beef streaming peaceably out of the draw behind them. Nobody had ever figured just how cattle talked to each other, but maybe they made sounds like Pete's music...sounds no human being could hear. It was only Pete's private herd that had been trained to that music, but they must have talked, for stringing behind them was the whole doggoned herd.

"It's loco," Tom chuckled, "and nobody's ever going to believe there sounds a man can't hear. But whatever it is, you did it, pardner, and the way you did it took some innards Gus Doremus ain't going to want to tackle."

Pete looked a little grey, but his eyes were level. "I reckon I'll have to offer him the chance to square things," he mumbled.

Tom laughed and slammed him on the back. "Over my dead body...I have got to bring you home in one piece and proper! But Gus ain't going to want that chance much, Pete. He ain't going to want to be reminded that it took a damn Yankee dude to unscramble a stampede was his fault in the first place, mister!"

THE END

An Intensely Human, Gripping Football

★ *Novel* ★

GO DOWN FIGHTING!

by Roe Richmond

★ *An All-Star Baseball Novelet* ★

DOCTOR SHORTSTOP

by Louis Trimble

and many other stories, in the big December issue, now on sale.

★ ALL ★

SPORTS

TROUBLE AT TRIANGLE

Action-Packed Feature Novelet

by Roe Richmond

They were stranded there at the Triangle when Duke Emberly and his lobos blew up the bridges. But Alma Winslow found the struggle in her heart taking precedence over danger, for there was something about the outlaw leader . . .

THE EASTBOUND stage from Grover City was late, a full half-hour now and still not in sight. Alma Winslow, owner of the Triangle Station, fretted worriedly about the pleasant main room of the establishment. With Jim Beckett at the ribbons the coach was seldom more than a few minutes off-time, never in her memory as late as this. Something certainly must have happened today. For weeks it had been rumored that the Emberley gang was heading for this Rentana region.

Isolated as it was, Triangle's only consistent link with the outer world was the daily stage, and everyone there was upset out of all normal proportion when the coach failed to appear. In the kitchen, Carmelita, the fat Mexican cook, and her daughter Rosa were keeping the noontime meal warm on the stove, with much native-tongue jabbering and complaining. Manuel, the handyman husband of Carmelita, with his son Pedro, had the change of horses ready in the livery barn. At the front of the depot, Peggy Lynn, the waitress, was chatting vivaciously with Donegan. For some reason this annoyed Alma more than ever.

"Something awful must've happened to make Jim Beckett this late," Peggy was saying plaintively, peering out the large front windows into the west. "Jim's as steady as that old grandfather's clock of Alma's.

"You think quite a lot of Jim, don't you?" drawled Donegan, deftly shaping another cigarette.

Peggy laughed with contrived shyness. "Probably because he never looks at me or pays the least bit of attention to me."

"Women are sure funny," Donegan said, lighting up and inhaling deeply, letting the smoke trickle from his fine nostrils.

Alma sauntered toward them, hating herself for the pettiness but unable to restrain it. "That's a profound observation, Donny."

Donegan turned with an easy charming smile, inclining his auburn head slightly, amusement in his strange clear amber eyes. He was a tall rangy young man, lean and long-limbed, with a lazy grace of movement. His smooth bronzed face, handsome in a clean boyish way, creased pleasantly with that gay reckless grin, but Alma knew he was

Vivacious Peggy Lynn was the drawing card at Triangle.

often sad and melancholy under the happy-go-lucky surface. "Perhaps you don't have enough to do around here, Donny," she went on with malice.

"You want me to sweep the floor or somethin'?" He indicated the immaculate boards with a careless wave of his hand.

Alma Winslow, a warm rush of color in her cheeks, felt wholly ridiculous. "Sorry, Don," she murmured. "Guess I'm on edge about the stage."

"We all are, Alma," said Donegan gently.

"I'll say so!" Peggy Lynn chirped brightly. "It'd take a holdup or a landslide to slow Jim up this much."

ALMA SMILED at her with thinly-veiled contempt and strolled back toward the rear of the room. It was foolish to be jealous of poor simple Peggy, just because she had hair like pure spun gold, and a face and figure that appealed instantly to all men. There was nothing in Peggy Lynn's head but a vague gilded concept of her own beauty and a frank endless interest in males. Alma realized that Donegan, like Jim Beckett, was aware of the girl's shallowness... But there was no denying the physical attraction that set men on fire; Alma was feminine enough to often wish she had never hired the blonde siren.

Still, Peggy was good for the business. Cowhands rode miles out of their way to eat at Triangle and flirt with the waitress. Miners and woodsmen came down from the mountains for the same purpose, and stagecoach passengers frequently stayed overnight to see more of the girl. Businessmen traveled all the way from Grover City and Red Butte to pay court to Peggy... She brought in money, but to Alma's mind it was somehow tainted; she had been better satisfied when dark, dumpy, be-mustached Rosa was waiting on table, and the male patrons concentrated on Carmelita's excellent food.

Well, Peggy Lynn was here, and she'd probably stay until some man married her, or carried her away with extravagant promises. Funny, how they drifted in out of nowhere, stayed over and became a part of Triangle... Donegan had come in one night, gaunt and grimy and ragged with a bullethole in his side, riding a jaded half-dead pony, to be nursed back to life and health, and remain as Alma's manager. Nearly two years ago, that was, and Alma still expected the law, or somebody, to come after him sooner or later. But Donegan didn't seem to worry about it; he had been a good man, a great help to Alma Winslow, but the mystery of him bothered her considerably.

She went out the back door and sat down on a bench in the shade, watching the high sun pour brilliantly down upon the wellhouse, the barn and sheds and out-buildings, the corrals and the bunkhouse. Towering massively over the rear of this layout was a sheer craggy cliff of the Arrowhead Mountains, walling the valley on the north.

Triangle lay on a wedge-shaped level of land, known as the Flatiron, jutting from the base of that steep cliff. The Rentana River had cut a deep jagged gorge around the triangular promontory, and old Chad Winslow had been quick to see the strategic value of this location. The valley at this point was pinched narrowly between the rock-faced Arrowheads on the north and the steep rough Sundance Hills on the south. It was expedient for the east-west road to cross the Flatiron, and Chad Winslow had staked his claim there and built the two bridges necessary to complete the highway links. He had put up the Triangle Stage Station and trading post, and collected tolls from his bridges until his death five years ago... This was what Alma had inherited at nineteen, and operated since that time.

A triangular island, its base set solidly against the Arrowheads, its point and flanks enclosed by the deep rocky chasm of the Rentana River. The only way in or out was across the bridges old Chad Winslow had constructed with such sol-

Alma could feel something was wrong when she heard the long-overdue stage coming in...

id care. A freak of nature, on which Alma's father had laid the foundation for a substantial fortune.

In five more years, Alma Winslow thought, *I'll have enough money for the rest of my life. But I'll also be on the brink of thirty without a husband, without anybody, all alone...*

Jim Beckett, rough and picturesque in his buckskins, handling six spirited horses with ease, assurance and a slight professional swagger, had been her girlhood hero and love. She was still very fond of Jim, although the glamor had gone, and Jim liked her—as an uncle or big brother might, she estimated. To Jim Beckett she was not a woman of twenty-four, she was still a child.

It had piqued her badly, until Donegan drifted in out of the night, harried and wounded with haunted yellowish eyes and a tangle of red-brown curls. Then she had transferred most of her romantic interests to Donegan, but here again there had been little or no real response. Donegan admired and respected her, Alma was sure, but there was always a barrier between them. The fact that he was an employee, deeply indebted to her, the boss, stood them forever apart... Alma had tried, in every subtle manner she knew, to bring about a closer easier relationship, but Donegan's cool quiet reserve inevitably forestalled her efforts.

It was as if there were three distinct levels in the hybrid family that occupied Triangle. The Mexicans at the bottom, Peggy Lynn and Donegan in the middle, and Alma Winslow on top—all alone. There were many times when she would have gladly swapped places with the frivolous blonde waitress; anything to make Donegan see her as a woman, instead of an employer.

ALMA KNEW she was attractive enough, without the gaudy brazen flash of Peggy Lynn, but having something a great deal better. Her hair was a rich brown, highlighted with gold in sunshine or lamplight, curling naturally and softly about her strong, well cut, fine-featured face. She had large intense black eyes, striking in the fair tanned skin. If the straight nose and firm chin were a trifle austere, the wide generous mouth offered warm relief. Her body, while lacking the exaggerated feminine fullness of Peggy's, was supple and graceful, deep-curved at breast and hip.

Yes, she was well-made and good

to look upon, handsome rather than pretty, yet something about her compelled men to keep a respectful distance. Smiling wryly, she decided it might be some cold proud quality bequeathed by her New England ancestors; the calm competent efficiency with which she conducted the business affairs of Triangle. Perhaps she was too disciplined and restrained, fastidiously neat and orderly... *Someday I'll have to put my pride aside,* she thought. *Let myself go. Make Donegan or Jim Beckett or some man know that I am all woman, soft and warm, lonely and yearning, full of fire.*

Restlessly Alma got up and went back inside, noting that the stage was nearly an hour late now. Donegan and Peggy Lynn were still lounging on the short bar at the front, talking and laughing lightly, and once more the sight angered Alma unreasonably. She wondered if they had kissed in her absence, and found that her hands were clenched tightly. Walking forward she was trying to think of some errand to send Peggy on, when Donegan straightened off the bar and said: "Here it comes! Old Jim's really pourin' it on 'em, too."

"He hates to be late, so!" cried Peggy, almost dancing in her childish excitement. "I'll bet Jim's so mad he's fit to be tied!"

"New man ridin' shotgun," announced Donegan, intent at the window; "looks like a full load today."

Alma spoke carefully, keeping her voice even: "Peggy, you'd better go tell Carmelita?."

Peggy Lynn turned in surprise. "Why sure, Alma. But I'll bet Carmie knows it as well as we do. She can *feel* that coach comin' before it's ever in sight." Peggy started obediently for the kitchen, humming a song, her superb hips swaying, shoulders and breasts arrogant.

Alma Winslow came to a halt close beside Donegan. "Does it look all right, Donny?"

"I don't rightly know—yet," he said, frowning and squinting his amber eyes. "That man on the box with Jim, he don't look like a regular guard; maybe I better get my gun-belt."

Donegan turned abruptly from the window, but Alma moved squarely in front of him. They collided breast to breast and Donegan drew back, his face apologetic, his hands catching her arms to steady her. "Sorry, Alma. I—"

"Never mind that, Don," she said. "And never mind the gun; look at me, Donny!"

"Yes, Alma?..." Donegan was embarrassed and puzzled.

"Well, what do you see?" she demanded, casting off all her reserve and dignity with a wilful effort.

Donegan smiled stiffly. "A mighty fine lady."

"Is that all?"

"Alma, I don't get it," he muttered helplessly. "What—?"

"Here, Donny," she said, her voice strained, foreign in her own ears, her cheeks scorched with shameful fire.

Slipping inside his long arms, Alma Winslow locked her own arms hard about his lean sinewy frame, crushing her body against him, lifting her face to his. Still shocked, wondering and uncertain, Donegan bent his auburn head over her, his mouth pressing down on her hungry lips, but without life or fervor or meaning... With a small broken sob, Alma pushed suddenly away from him, shaking her bowed brown head.

"It's no good, is it, Donny?" she panted softly. "I'm sorry, very sorry; please forgive me."

"But Alma," he said, gesturing hopelessly, his amber eyes and fine clear face baffled.

The stagecoach was booming and clattering across the West Bridge now, the hollow thunder rolling and echoing over the Flatiron, a vast saffron dustcloud billowing back on the far side of the gorge.

"All right, Donny," Alma said, calmly and kindly. "Go out and meet the passengers."

Alma would have gladly traded her position at Triangle with Peggy Lynn; Peggy, who attracted all the men...

Chapter Two

THE MINUTE Alma Winslow stepped outside on the broad deep porch, she knew that something was very wrong. It showed in the weary sag of Jim Beckett's wide muscular shoulders, and every line of his square rugged face. A ragged blood-crusted gash marked his forehead... The six horses, drooping in the traces, were lathered, blown and sweat-rimed. The coach was full of men with hard bleak faces and cold alert eyes, bristling with rifles and guns, and the smell of powdersmoke still mingled with the alkali dust.

The man on top with Jim was big and well-built in a black suit and hat, both obviously expensive under the dust film, the coat caught back behind two bone-handled revolvers. He had lustrous black hair, flashing black eyes that saw everything instantly, and his scarred strong-boned face was rather handsome in a sinister fashion. He swung easily to the ground, the double-barreled shotgun in his hand, and Alma saw that there was an air of absolute authority and insolent confidence about him. He moved with an easy natural swagger, his dark head proud and superior on the broad sloping shoulders, his mouth curved scornfully. She knew instinctively that it was Duke Emberley, the notorious outlaw, an almost legendary gunman and killer.

The passengers that piled out wore two guns and carried carbines, and one of them had a wounded arm slung in a bloody scarf. Another lay unconscious on the floor of the Concord, and two of the men lifted him out, at Emberley's command, carrying him inside the main building. One of the bandits, a wizened little man with acid-bitter eyes and mouth, searched Donegan for a gun and went on toward the stable to check the Mexicans there. That would be Tyle Previtt, Emberley's lieutenant, decided Alma.

"Unload everythin', boys," ordered Emberley, and looked up at Jim Beckett. "When they're done, drive to the barn and put up the horses. You won't be goin' anywhere for quite a spell, Beck." He laughed immoderately, then sobered with instant sharpened attention. "Careful with that dynamite, you fools!" Among other things, the men were bringing out moneybags that must have contained a fortune, Alma figured.

Peggy Lynn appeared on the gallery, and one of the men whistled in loud appreciation of her voluptuous figure.

"Cut it out, Clody," said Duke; "we've got work to do. You and Avant take the West Bridge, Brock and Helmut the East. Do a good job now, them bridges was built to last. Velasquez, you start movin' the stuff inside. All right, Beckett, get this hack out of the way."

JIM WHEELED his team around and drove toward the rear area and the barn, where Manuel and Pedro were waiting in open-mouth pop-eyed wonder and terror. The dynamiters had split their supply and were moving in opposite directions toward the two bridges. Duke Emberley turned to Alma Winslow for the first time, ignoring Donegan. "If you people behave, nobody'll get hurt here," he said, lifting his hat and bowing slightly.

"You're going to blow up my bridges?" she asked, breathless and incredulous. Donegan stared at the outlaw with cold fixed intensity.

"Got to, ma'am," Emberley said laconically. "The whole country's out after us. We stood up two banks in Grover City, but we lost all our horses and some of our men. Can't run any farther, so we got to hole up here. Kelton's wounded bad, and Velasquez got hit in the arm."

"Well, I guess there's nothing we can do about it."

"Not a thing, Miss Winslow. Just treat us right, and we'll do likewise with you folks; you look like a smart sensible girl."

"Thank you," Alma said ironically.

Duke Emberley bowed and smiled with faint mockery. "Now we've got to patch Kelton up. Anybody here good with bullet wounds?"

"Carmelita, my cook, has had some experience," Alma told him, remembering how the Mexican woman had taken care of Donegan.

"We'll put her to work, and then we'll eat."

"Dinner has been waiting for an hour."

Duke smiled. "Sorry to be late; we had to do some shootin' along the road."

Alma looked at Donegan. "Will you call Carmelita, Donny? I'm going out to see Jim." Donegan nodded and departed at once, with Emberley watching him shrewdly.

"Nice lookin' boy you got there, Miss Winslow. Better warn him not to get any ideas though." With a casual salute, Emberly started to follow Donegan inside, pausing to say: "And don't you bother the boys at the bridges; I'd hate to have anythin' happen to a girl as pretty as you."

Alma went around the corner of the building toward the stable, strangely stirred inside herself. Duke Emberley saw her as a woman, and no mistake. His dark gaze had been flattering, caressing, ardent with interest. It was a pleasure to be looked at that way—it set a girl's heart to tripping, warmed her blood, started a delightful quivering deep within her. Outlaw or not, Emberly was a vitally, disturbingly attractive man.

Jim Beckett was dousing his head and face in the horse trough, while Manuel and Pedro unharnessed and rubbed down the horses. Tyle Previtt, satisfied that the Mexicans were unarmed and harmless, had gone to supervise the blowing of the West Bridge.

"Are you all right, Jim?"

Beckett looked up, blowing water and shaking his wet sandy head. "Sure, they didn't hurt me any; just clipped me with a gun barrel. But they killed the Swede." His rough face hardened, the jawbones jutting, and his blue eyes flared. Swede Lindstrom, the guard, had ridden with Jim ever since Alma could recall. The news of his death struck through her like cold steel.

"I didn't want to bring 'em here, Al," went on Jim Beckett. "But I couldn't do any different. Tried to wreck the rig once, and Emberley came mighty close to shootin' me. They're a pack of mad dogs, Al."

"They're going to dynamite the bridges, Jim."

"Sure, they're that desperate. They've got all the money in Grover City sacked up there. Took both banks at the same time, but somebody mowed down the horse-holders and horses; so they grabbed the stage and shot their way out in it. Some little war, Al!"

"What are we going to do, Jim?"

"Sit tight and wait for somethin' to break," Jim Beckett said glumly. "All we can do, Al. Maybe Donny and me can figure a move."

"Nobody can get in here."

"Not unless they bridge the gorge, or climb down that cliff. Either way'd take a long time."

"Well, they can't get out either."

"That's right," said Jim Beckett. "It'll wear on their nerves after a while. They'll start scrappin' among themselves or s o m e t h i n'. We'll just have to wait, Al."

"Come on in to dinner, Jim," invited Alma Winslow.

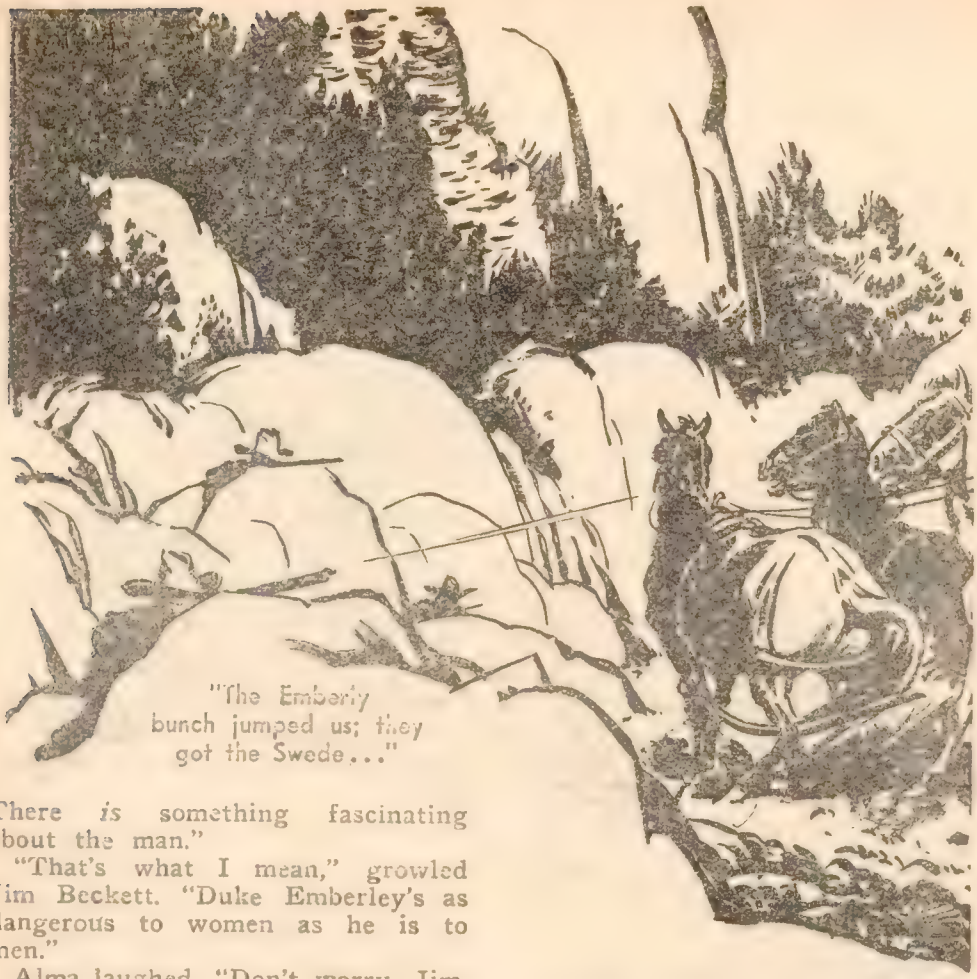
Beckett smiled grimly. "Yeah, reckon I better keep my strength up. I wanta be ready for them coyotes when the ball opens."

THEY WALKED across past the cool well-house toward the rear door of the station. In the shadow of the wall, Jim Beckett drew Alma into the strong shelter of his great arm and massive shoulder. "You watch yourself with 'em, little girl. 'Specially that Emberley. He's got a way with women; that's one of his biggest brags."

"Peggy Lynn ought to be woman enough for him."

"He's smart, Duke is. He won't want Peggy; he'll be after you, Al."

A thrill rippled through Alma, in spite of herself. "I'll watch out, Jim.



"The Emberly bunch jumped us; they got the Swede..."

There *is* something fascinating about the man."

"That's what I mean," growled Jim Beckett. "Duke Emberley's as dangerous to women as he is to men."

Alma laughed. "Don't worry, Jim. I'm a big girl now."

"That don't help none in this case; makes it worse, in fact."

Alma reached up and brushed her mouth along the hard stubbled line of his square jaw, and Jim Beckett kissed her tenderly on the brow. Something quickened in him then, as if he realized for the first time she was a full-grown woman, and with the fragrance of her hair rioting through his senses, Jim's arms tightened automatically about her, grinding her firm-curved body against his solid iron-hard bulk.

"Alma, little Al," he said, hoarse and shaken, holding her so hard she could barely breathe.

"Yes, Jim," she whispered, raising her mouth to him because she knew he wanted it now, and she had needed to be wanted for a long, long time.

Beckett lowered his lips on hers, all hunger and desire for a full throbbing minute, and then almost roughly he shoved her away from him, mumbling: "No, no, it's not right, little Al."

Alma Winslow leaned on the shady wall, waiting for the tumult to cease in her breast, the blood to slow and cool in her veins. She scarcely knew whether to be relieved or disappointed. It hadn't worked much better with Jim than it had with Donegan; she wondered if there was any man in the world with whom it would be right and good, whole-hearted and all-consuming, giving and taking freely.

"Shall we go in, Jim?" Alma Winslow asked quietly.

"You go ahead, Al," said Jim Beckett, patting her on the shoulder. "I need a couple of minutes to

get my feet back on the ground, and the buzzin' out of my brain." He grinned ruefully and touched his swollen lacerated forehead. "Reckon that Emberley must of hit me harder'n I thought."

* * *

Later, they were at the dinner table when the bridges were blown, the West going first, the East a few minutes afterward, the tremendous blasts rocking the main structure on its foundation, jarring the crockery and glassware, bringing a pelting shower of rock fragments and splintered timber. Quiet washed slowly back as the thundering echoes rumbled and thinned away, and the Flatiron stood cut off, completely isolated from the rest of the narrow Rentana Valley.

The outlaws came in, joking and laughing hilariously, and the hulking young Clody yelled: "Where's that blonde gal? That's what I want for my dinner!" Peggy Lynn came strutting out of the kitchen, and most of the men clustered eagerly around the girl, examining her full-breasted strong-hipped figure.

But Duke Emberley was watching Alma Winslow, as Beckett had predicted. She could feel his dark eyes constantly on her, and it was difficult to swallow the food. The Duke had had scores of women like the brassy blonde Peggy, but never a lady like Alma.

The afternoon was waning, the blood-red sun sinking toward the Howerton Range in the west, when the posse from Grover City arrived and halted in helpless rage before the hanging wreckage of the destroyed bridge. The outlaws, settled in the bunkhouse, kept out of view, and the posse couldn't fire into the

Flatiron with eight innocent people there. It was a perfect stalemate, as Emberley had anticipated.

Chapter Three

KELTON, the badly wounded young outlaw, died on the second day, and was buried out back near the foot of the cliff. That left seven of the bandits including Velasquez, whose bullet-shattered arm seemed to grow steadily worse instead of better. Carmelita declared she had done all she could for him; the wound had gone untended too long, and there was danger of gangrene.

In the evening Alma Winslow was sitting alone outside the rear door of the depot watching the moonlight's radiance on the craggy heights of Arrowhead, when Duke Emberley emerged and stood beside her. "Forgive the intrusion, Miss Winslow," he said politely. "But I have a favor to ask of you." When she looked up inquiringly, the Duke continued: "I want to write to Kelton's folks, back in Ohio, but I'm not much of a hand with a pen. I thought maybe you'd write the letter for me."

"Do they know—what he was doing?"

"No, they just think he was ridin' for me, honest and legitimate."

"I'll write it," Alma said, "if you'll give me an idea of what you want to say."

Inside she got pen, ink, and paper, and sat down at a back corner table where Emberley had lighted a lamp. Up front the outlaws were drinking at the little bar, served by a silent sullen Donegan, whose amber eyes kept flickering toward Alma and the Duke... Big Brock and the husky Clody were joshing with Peggy Lynn, vying openly and good-naturedly for her favor, and after a time she went out the front door with both of them in attendance.

Emberley observed this somberly. "That blonde wench could cause a lot of trouble."

"She usually does," Alma admitted.

The letter that Emberley more or less dictated was a model of sympathetic understanding, gentle consideration, shared grief and loss. Alma thought he could have written it very well himself, yet she was gratified that he had asked her assistance. Regardless of his lurid and terrifying reputation, she decided, Emberley was a man of intelligence and sensitivity, with good breeding behind him, a gentleman gone wrong. He was plainly interested in her, and his nearness stirred and warmed the girl.

After the letter was sealed and stamped, Alma said: "I don't know how you're going to mail this."

"We'll be movin' out of here," Emberley said casually; "there's a way up that cliff, isn't there?"

"My father climbed it once. I don't know of anyone else who has."

"If it has been done, we can do it. I did a lot of rock climbin' when I was a boy... Heard there was a way down into the gorge, too. Across the Rentana and up the other side. Your father cut some steps and hand-holds."

Alma looked surprised. "You know more about the Flatiron than I do, Mr. Emberley."

"Please call me Duke—and let me call you Alma," said Emberley suavely. "Formality annoys me, after a time... In my business, Alma, you have to know the country you're goin' to work. If you don't want to show us the gorge passage, we'll find it."

Tyle Previtt entered the back door and paused at their table, a slight warped figure, the guns oversized on his thin flanks, his face bitter-lined and acidulous, his eyes glinting narrow and evil.

"Velasquez's arm is worse, Duke," he said tersely; "it ought to come off. And Brock and Clody are goin' to bust each other over that damnfool girl."

"You never have any good news, Tyle."

"I tell the truth," Previtt said doggedly, wholly without humor.

"Could you hack off that arm?"

"If I had to, I could."

"It would kill Velesquez."

"He's goin' to die anyway, Duke," said Previtt gloomily.

Emberley gestured dismissal. "I'll think it over, Tyle. Have yourself a few drinks and cheer up." Previtt ambled on, bowlegged and crook-armed, and Duke smiled at the girl. "Let's take a walk in the moonlight."

THEY WERE at the back door, Donegan's eyes following them from the bar, when Jim Beckett stepped inside and stood broad and solid as a rock, staring at them with ice-blue eyes, lips taut on his teeth and jawbones ridged with muscle.

"Somethin' on your mind, friend?" drawled Duke Emberley.

"Plenty," Jim Beckett said. "I'm tellin' you, Emberley, don't try to play fast and free with *this* girl!"

"You're in no position to tell me anythin', Beck. But you don't need to worry about Miss Winslow; I know a lady when I see one."

"I hope so, Duke," Beckett said through his teeth. "Because I don't care what the odds are; I'll kill anybody that harms Alma!"

"Relax, Beck, nobody's goin' to harm her," Emberley promised. "The blonde's the one you boys should be worryin' about."

Jim Beckett laughed briefly. "Peggy? Who in hell could hurt her? It's them young buckaroos of yours that are to be pitied, in that case."

"Maybe you're right, at that," said Emberley with a pleasant smile, and ushered Alma out through the doorway.

A pure white moon, high above the Sundance Hills, poured its silvery light over the earth, as they strolled past the well and barn, the sheds and corrals, toward the rock-face of the Arrowheads, but away from the section where young Kelton was buried. Duke Emberley spoke in low gentle tones as they moved through blue shadows and white moonlight, of the brevity of life and its loneliness and sorrows, the fleeting pleasures and stark tragedies, the beauty and the misery of the world. Weaving a tenuous fragile spell about Alma Winslow, playing on her emotions with a masterful touch, wooing and winning her without seeming to at all. He was the most eloquent man she had ever known, and, with the moonglow softening the harsh sinister lines of his face, the handsomest.

In the dense shadow of the overhanging cliff, Duke Emberley drew her into his arms with tender care, holding her lightly until Alma's heart and blood began to race madly, and her arms went around him with eager clutching strength. Then, with a calm deliberate expertness, Emberley kissed her, gradually tightening his clasp and increasing the pressure of his lips... Alma, lost in the upflaring wonder and rapture of it, thought this was what she had been wanting, needing, waiting a lifetime for. There was no awkwardness and reluctance, no holding back on either side. It bloomed simply and naturally as a wild-flower, filling her with ecstasy and brimming delight.

The flame was rising in Duke Emberley too, and the grasp of his arms and force of his mouth became greedy, ruthless, almost brutal. Through the floodtide of fire, some warning note struck into her mind, cold and insistent. Alma struggled frantically to free herself, but by that time Emberley was too aroused and demanding to be aware of her panic and let her go. They were still locked in that crushing embrace, mouths welded together, when the sudden shocking blast of gunfire tore them apart, and sent Duke Emberley running toward the roaring sound. Stunned, shaken to the depths, gasping for breath, Alma Winslow ran unsteadily after him as the high-pitched scream of a woman soared splittingly above the fading echoing explosions.

BIG BROCK was sprawled face down in the moon-whitened gravel beside a corral, a smoking

gun in his huge hand, and Clody was slumped back on the rails, his magnificent body riddled and sagging, his gun-hand trailing slackly toward the earth.

Emberley swore in cold savage fury. "I told you, Clody! I warned you both! How can anybody be so stupid?"

"Couldn't—help it—Duke," panted Clody. "Brock—started reachin'—first."

Emberley cursed again, half-crazed with rage and disgust, and Alma, watching from the darkness of a shed, could hardly believe he was the same man. Emberley made a lightning move, and his gun barrel glimmered in the moonlight.

"Don't, Duke—*don't*!" sobbed Clody, writhing on the rails. "I'm dyin' anyway—please, Duke."

"Die then, you half-baked fool!" snarled Duke Emberley, and loud orange flames lanced from his hand, bright and deafening.

Clody lurched and buckled on the corral rails, grunting and moaning as he toppled forward, silvery dust clouding about his large loose bulk as it settled in the dirt.

Emberley raised his voice: "Tyle Previtt!—Avant!—Helmut! Outside here, you men. We've got some more grave-diggin' to do!"

Despite Duke's warning, the rivalry over Peggy Lynn had led to a fatal shoot-out . . .

Alma Winslow, chilled with horror and scrubbing at her mouth with the back of her hand, raced through shadow-patterned moonlight toward the front of the main building. Thank heaven she had seen Duke Emberley for what he was, before it was too late... There were only five of them left now, she reflected, and perhaps Velasquez was dying. She wanted to scour her face and body with soap and water, wondering if any amount of washing could make her feel clean again.

There's no use, she thought. *There just isn't any man for me. Something wrong with every one of them, so far as I'm concerned... They either see me as a cold, high-handed employer, or as a pure sainted child. Or a toy, a plaything, to be used and thrown aside.*

Donegan was just leaving the bar, when she burst in the front door, and he whirled at once toward her. "Are you all right, Alma? What happened out there?"

"Yes, I'm all right," she panted painfully, and told him what had occurred in the backyard.

"They'll kill each other off, in time," he said grimly, and then: "Alma! What's wrong with you? Did that Emberley—?"

"No, no, it's nothing, Donny," she protested in desperation; "just that shooting, I guess."

Donegan was looking at her as a woman now, without any question, a lovely frightened girl to be protected, but Alma was too distraught to notice the difference in him. Donegan's arms were ready to hold and comfort her, his mouth eager to kiss and soothe her trembling lips, but she pushed him away.

She wanted to be alone, had to be alone; Alma twisted past Donegan and hastened blindly to her room, locking the door, flinging herself across the bed, racked by great dry sobs.

IN THE night, Alma Winslow wakened from a tormented nightmare to the sound of screaming from the bunkhouse, and knew it was Velasquez in unbearable torture with his wounded gangrenous arm. In the morning, the Mexican outlaw was dead, and Alma wondered if Emberley or one of the others had killed him so they could sleep better.

There were but four of the bandits left alive, and Emberley was getting ugly enough to kill everybody in sight. He made Donegan and Jim Beckett dig this fourth grave at the base of the rock-walled Arrowheads, standing over them with drawn guns while they labored and sweated in the morning sun. Tyle Previtt watched with sardonic satisfaction, but Avant and Helmut walked away from the scene.

"This Flatiron's gettin' to be one big graveyard," muttered Jim Beckett, pausing to rest.

"Shut up and use that shovel, or you'll be Number Five."

"Sure, sure, you're the boss, Duke," sighed Jim Beckett with some irony, and went back to digging.

Between strokes of the pick, Donegan's amber eyes flared up at Emberley, but he said nothing.

"Put your back into it!" snarled Emberley, "before I take a quirt to you, Redhead!"

With four of his men dead, and his prospects of winning Alma ruined, the Duke was in a perpetual state of relentless hating fury, on the hair-trigger edge of turning his guns loose at the slightest provocation. Donegan thought they'd have to do something, and damn soon, before this big black madman murdered them all.

The odds were getting better all the time. Four-to-two wasn't so bad, if they could get hold of some of the weapons the outlaws had confiscated. Frenchy Avant and Dutch Helmut acted sick and tired of the whole business, but Emberley and Previtt would be watching everyone like turkey vultures. Those two would be tough to take.

"You look kinda familiar to me, Redhead," said Emberley, scanning Donegan's sweat-shining bronze face intently. "I've been tryin' to place that pretty-boy pan of yours ever since we landed here."

"We never met up before."

"Maybe not, Red. But I've seen you somewhere. Or somebody that looked a lot like you... Come on, bend into it now!" Emberley's voice lashed out. "It's gettin' too hot to stand here in the sun."

* * *

AT SUPPER that evening, it was obvious that Duke Emberley had waited as long as he could. Something was working inside the big man, seething, simmering, boiling, like a volcano on the verge of erupting. He had to have action of some sort.

Alma was afraid, the hard-shelled Peggy was frightened, and the Mexican women in the kitchen kept crossing themselves fearfully and mumbling prayers. Donegan and Jim Beckett were extremely uncomfortable without guns. Avant and Helmut hurried through the meal, and retired to the bunkhouse with a bottle of whiskey and a deck of cards. Peggy Lynn went outside a few minutes later, her hips twitching more than ever with nervousness.

Duke Emberley glared at Donegan and Beckett. "All right, you two. Take a walk for yourselves."

"No place to go, Duke," protested Beckett.

Emberley's chair scraped back as he came swiftly to his feet, hands hovering spread-fingered near the

bone gun-handles. "Beat it! Get out before I burn you down!"

Unarmed, helpless, there was nothing they could do but leave as he commanded. Reluctantly, dragging their boots, they walked to the front door and outside into the night.

Emberley smiled at Previtt. "Get a bottle of the best liquor and three glasses, Tyle; we're goin' to have a party."

Previtt did as directed, and the Duke poured three drinks, placing one in front of Alma Winslow. "But I don't drink—Duke."

"You'll drink tonight," he said. "If I have to pour it down your throat."

It'll make me sick."

"Never mind what it'll do; drink it down, Alma!"

They drank, the girl gasping and coughing from the fiery stuff, and Duke Emberley laughed uproariously. "Pour her another drink and a water chaser, Tyle. It's time she was educated a little. Tonight we'll give her the full course."

Gagging a bit, Alma tossed off the second one, easing the burn with gulps of water. Emberley insisted on a third, a few minutes later, and that one went down easier, but Alma knew it was the limit for her.

"Please, I can't drink any more," she pleaded. "I just can't do it, Duke."

"All right, baby," he laughed, drinking deeply from the bottle. "We'll adjourn now; Tyle will see that we are not disturbed."

ALMA SPRANG into instant flight, but Emberley caught her by the wrist before she had taken three strides, snapping her back into his arms, lifting her bodily and carrying her down the corridor toward her room in the rear wing of the station. There was no sense in struggling against his great strength, and no point in screaming. Alma wished she could faint.

"Bring the bottle, Tyle," called Emberley over one wide shoulder. "And keep an eye on things out here."

Previtt followed with the whiskey, grumbling to himself: "Sure, have your fun. But I never seen a

time yet when this kinda fun didn't bring trouble and trouble a-plenty. A man lays himself wide open goin' after a woman; he ain't half the man he'd be with no woman on his brain. I tell you, Duke, I don't like this, none whatever."

"Shut up, you sour-faced old goat!" laughed Duke Emberley. "And use them irons if you spot anybody on the prowl. Me and my lovely bride don't want any interruptions, Tyle; you know how it is on the weddin' night!"

"It's against everythin' decent," Previtt muttered. "Why couldn't you take the yellah haired one, Duke?"

"Because she's nothin' but a bum. Because the Duke's got to have the best there is around, Tyle." Emberley laughed with reckless merriment, holding Alma as if she weighed nothing, kicking the door shut behind him. Alma started to fight and scream hysterically then, alone with this big merciless man in the moonlit room, but Emberley only went on laughing and clasping her firm-rounded form to him.

Outside in the hallway, wizened little Tyle Previtt scowled ferociously and swore, and loosened the big Colt .44's in their sheaths, his steel-sharp bitter eyes roving alertly as he paced bowlegged back toward the main room of Triangle.

Dutch and Frenchy ought to be here, he thought fretfully. *There's two of them, and a couple of Mex's besides, and they'll try anything to get to that girl. Duke's a damn fool to pull a stunt like this, with all that money we got stashed in the bunkhouse... Beckett and that Redhead'll lay hands on some kinda weapons and come at me for sure. Well, I'll just have to shoot the poor*

suckers, if they do, much as I hate to shoot men without guns on 'em... Duke ain't got no right putting me in such a spot, damn his black hungry eyes.

Chapter Four

OUT ON THE front gallery, Jim Beckett and Donegan had been walking back and forth, swearing and swinging their empty hands, trying to figure some course of action. "What's he up to, Jim?" asked Donegan dully.

"You know as well as I do."

"We've got to stop him; there must be some way."

"Name one," growled Beckett. "It won't help Alma any to get ourselves shot to pieces."

"It sure woke me up, the way that Emberley looked at her," Donegan mused. "I never realized what a woman Alma is, I guess. She's such a nice refined lady..."

"Ladies are human, like anybody else. It's about time you woke up, Donny. I think the girl's in love with you. Or would be, if you gave her half a chance."

"She used to be in love with you, Jim."

Beckett snorted. "That was kid stuff; she thought I was a big hero, crackin' that long whip over six horses, racin' the stage in a cloud of dust. That's long gone, Donny."

"I'm goin' in," Donegan said, breaking abruptly for the door, but Jim Beckett jumped and caught him in an iron grip.

"It's suicide, boy. Dead, you're no good to her—or anybody. We'll think of somethin', Donny."

"How about the bedroom window? We can't wait too long, Jim."

"Not yet, kid," Jim Beckett said. "Shut up and let me think."

They were standing in stark silence, when light running footsteps sounded in the backyard, swishing nearer in the night, and stray lamplight gleamed golden on windblown hair as Peggy Lynn rounded the corner of the station and reeled on toward them. The worthless, useless empty-headed waitress, with six-guns swinging in either hand.

"Here," she panted, stumbling to a stop and holding out the revolvers, the two men grabbing them eagerly, incredulously, checking the loads and hefting the guns with loving care.

"Bless you, girl!" Jim Beckett said. "How'd you do it?"

"I got Avant and Helmut drunk—and lovesick," Peggy Lynn said, smiling wanly. "Have to go back now. You boys—carry on." With a gay brave salute, she turned and went weaving back toward the bunkhouse.

"Go in the front way and take Previtt, Jim," said Donegan, all doubt and indecision gone. "I'll go around back and wait for Emberley to come out. Leave the Duke for me, Jim, I want him myself."

JIM BECKETT nodded, thrusting the gun in under the waistband of his trousers, the loose jacket hiding it completely, and stalking toward the front door. Donegan, gun in hand, went around the corner toward the barn in full stride, exulting in the release of action, the balanced weight of the Colt in his grasp.

When Beckett entered the front door, Tyle Previtt called sharply from the mouth of the corridor at the rear, not bothering to draw as yet: "Where you goin', Beckett? Get back outa here."

"I need a drink." Beckett went behind the bar, picked up a bottle with two glasses, and wandered on toward Previtt.

"Hold up there! Don't come any closer, Beck."

"What's the matter with you, Tyle?" asked Beckett. "Your nerves bad or somethin'? Have a drink with me. Duke's havin' his fun."

"All right, come ahead and pour 'em," Previtt said. "But don't try anythin' funny."

"Would I go against a gunman like you barehanded?" Jim Beckett

demanded; "do I look that foolish, Tyle?"

Previtt permitted himself a thin bleak grimace that might have passed for a grin and waited, his eyes and hands alert and ready. Beckett poured two drinks with a steady hand, and pushed one across the tabletop as he set down the bottle, lifting his own glass lefthanded. When Previtt reached for the other glass, Beckett ripped the gun out of his waistline and belted the barrel across Tyle's head.

Bowing low under the blow, drooping floorward and only half-conscious, Tyle Previtt's trained reflexes still threw his righthand gun clear and triggered once. The bullet passed between Jim's left arm and body, tugging hotly at his shirt, as Previtt struck the boards. Throwing down swiftly Jim Beckett fired once, smashing Previtt's right shoulder into the floor, driving the last bit of consciousness from the thin warped body. As Beckett bent to secure Tyle's guns, Emberley's muffled voice rang down the hallway:

"Tyle! What's goin' on out there, Tyle?.... *Previtt*, where are you?"

There was, of course, no response. Jim Beckett stood there, stolid and rocklike, gun cocked in hand and blue eyes fixed on the door of Alma's room. But the door did not open; instead there was the jangling crash of breaking glass as Emberley went out the bedroom window.

Donegan was waiting in the shadow of a cottonwood when the outlaw leader hurtled from that window in a sparkling shower of glass fragments, landing catlike in a balanced crouch, guns in either hand and eyes searching the shadow-fretted moonlight.

"Right here, Duke," said Donegan, stepping out into the open and lining his .44.

Emberley spun, fire spurting from both fists with a concerted thunderous roar, and Donegan felt the warm breath of lead as his own Colt flamed, bucking up in his hand. Emberley gasped and swayed backward on jacking knees, falling spread-eagled against the wall of the building, trying to lift his hands for another shot, sliding slowly, heavily and slackly into the sparse dry grass.

Donegan walked warily forward, gun ready, but Emberley did not stir. He was alive, however, staring up with bulging horrified eyes.

"I can't move," he moaned. "You broke my back."

"That's too bad," Donegan said. "I've waited a long time for this, Duke."

"Who are you—anyway?"

"Remember Hale Donnelly, the one that looked like me? The one you shot and left to die in the Gila Desert? He was my brother."

Emberley groaned. "Hale, he knew about Flatiron. Is that how—?"

Donegan nodded. "That's why I'm here, Duke. I knew you'd hit Triangle sometime."

"I'm dyin'," Emberley panted in terror.

"Maybe not," Donegan said. "Maybe you'll live to suffer as much as you deserve."

WITH A small cry of panic, Duke Emberley lost consciousness, and Donegan gathered up the two guns and turned away, as Jim Beckett emerged from the back door and Peggy Lynn came running up from the bunkhouse. "They're both passed out," Peggy said. "Or sleepin', if you want to put it polite. You can have 'em any time you want 'em, boys."

"Peggy and I'll take care of them two," Jim Beckett said. "You'd better go in and see Al, Donny. You're the one she's askin' for."

"Is she—all right, Jim?"

"Yeah, he didn't hurt her a bit, outside of scarin' her pretty bad. She's all right, thanks to Peggy here."

"You sure did a job of work tonight, Peg," said Donegan. "We owe everythin' to you, girl."

"Not at all, Donny." Peggy Lynn giggled and tossed her golden head in the moonbeams. "I had a lot of fun. That Frenchy and Dutch, they're the dumbest dopiest boys I ever saw. They don't know the first thing about women!"

"They probably will after tonight," Jim Beckett said dryly. "Come on, Peggy, let's wrap this deal up. Get on inside there, Donegan, or do I have to boot you in the pants to start you movin'?"

Donegan grinned and strode to the rear door, pausing inside to drink from Jim's bottle and inspect the wounded trussed-up Tyle Previtt. Nervous and shaky, now that it was over, Donegan took another long swig, and walked down the corridor to rap on Alma's door.

"Come in," she said, and then: "Thank the Lord you're all right, Donny!"

"And you, Alma."

"Are they—dead?"

"No, just wounded. Previtt'll be up around in a month or so; I don't know about Emberley."

"More work for Carmelita."

"Yeah, she gets all the worst jobs," Donegan said. "And Alma, we were real lucky to have Peggy Lynn here tonight." He told her what Peggy had done.

"Good girl," approved Alma. "I'm sorry for all the times I resented her; I guess I was jealous."

"Jealous? You don't have to be jealous of anybody, Alma."

"I didn't know that, Donny. I didn't know much of anything."

"I wasn't very smart myself," Donegan said. "I couldn't see you as a flesh-and-blood woman."

"Well, I am," she murmured, smiling. "In spite of my puritan forefathers."

ALMA WINSLOW was standing before him, the lamp glowing now, highlighting strands of gold in her brown hair, her eyes warm and dark on his clear boyish face and high auburn head. Donegan drew her into his arms, firmly and surely, breathing in her fragrance, feeling the rich curved fullness of her body against him.

"All woman," he said softly. "For which I am duly grateful... And all women to me, Alma."

"That's the way I want it, Donny." She raised her face, her red mouth arched and ripe, her eyes deep enough to drown in.

"The way it's goin' to be—always." His lips descended on hers clean and hard, their mouths fusing in sweet fire, their bodies blending in blissfull beauty, fitting to perfection, her arms holding with a power that nearly matched his.

There was no mistake this time, she thought with happy assurance. No restraint or evasion, nothing false or contrived. Their union was whole-hearted and single-minded, natural as breathing, honest and flawless. There was a depth of feeling, a height of ecstasy, that no other embrace ever approached. Delight welled up in Alma Winslow, shimmering and spreading, until she was on the verge of swooning from sheer joy and happiness.

They broke apart at last, breathless and reluctant, worshipping one another with their eyes. Over her gilded brown head Donegan saw the ragged ugliness of the shattered window, and he said; "Let's go outside, out front, Alma."

They went out through the main room without a glance at the senseless Previtt, and stood in the thick silvered dust of the front yard, staring up at the pure disk of the moon.

"The posse can throw a bridge across now, Alma," said Donegan.

"I almost wish they couldn't, now that we've found each other," Alma sighed. "I don't mind being cut off from the rest of the world."

"I know what you mean," he smiled. "But we need bridges to get a preacher, I reckon."

"And then we'll come back here—and stay?"

"Sure, Alma. As long as you want to... It's kinda like home to me too, now." Donegan eased her in under his long arm, firmly to his chest, his mouth moving against her soft-curled hair.

"Anywhere that we're together, Donny, will be home," Alma Winslow said, grave with the wonder of this miracle that had come to them out of conflict and bloodshed and suffering. "It's a comforting thought, isn't it?"

"It sure is, Alma," drawled Donegan. "And true as true can be."

THE END

Mollie's quirt lashed out as her temper flared.

RUSTLER'S DARLING

by H. C. Eaton

Jessica Leslie was sure she could save the situation by marrying Brad Steele. Only Brad had other ideas . . .

OLD NED LESLIE raised his shaggy white head and his piercing, ice-blue eyes shot from one to the other of the two girls standing near his desk. "I appeal to you, father," said one. "Silvermane isn't a safe horse for Mollie to ride. He's killed one man. And Mollie . . ."

"Oh, scat!" Mollie flung impatiently at the girl confronting her. "Silvermane is not a killer; it was purely an accident that he killed that man. I'm not afraid of Silvermane."

"But father . . ." Old Ned's laugh interrupted his daughter's appeal. "Don't ask me to settle your disputes," he growled. "Though, I don't think Moll is in any danger from Silvermane, Jessie."

Jessica Leslie swished the air im-

patiently with her riding crop. Old Ned's eyes glowed as they ran over her tall, slender form, immaculate in a snow-white riding costume of some soft material, with a black sombrero set precisely on her small, yellow-crowned head. Her eyes were the same ice-blue as his, but her skin was fair and delicate.

"Queen o' the range," she was called. And she was every inch a queen, old Ned was thinking.

But—"a chip off the old block," a few whispered when she had failed to get her way about something and her soft, rosy lips thinned and hardened.

Mollie Baird, Ned's ward and the daughter of his boyhood friend, was as tall and willowy as Jessica. She stood now with her small feet planted far apart. Small bare hands were thrust deep into the pockets of her blue-denim pants belted over a gray turtle-neck sweater. And the usually gay, irrepressible Mollie was belligerent from the top of her mahogany red head to the tips of her half boots. Her eyes, the exact shade of her hair, blazed defiance.

"If Uncle Ned says I mustn't ride Silvermane, then I won't. But until he does say it, I'll ride Silvermane when I choose." Her soft voice was cool and crisp.

Jessica shrugged her slim shoulders. "As you please," she murmured. "I only spoke for your good. Perhaps you don't know that people—some people—are making remarks about your riding."

"Who is?" Mollie demanded hotly.

"Brad Steele."

"What did he say?"

"That you can't ride a horse without making a spectacle of yourself."

"I don't believe it."

Again Jessica shrugged. "It was in Ed Lowry's store yesterday afternoon. He was talking to a man I didn't know. And, after all, Mollie, you are well past twenty. You could be a little more dignified, you know."

Mollie's smooth little chin tilted saucily. "You be the lady, Jessie. I guess I'm just not the type. And I don't care what Brad Steele thinks of me."

She turned and went with free, easy strides from the room. But she was seeing things through a shimmering film of tears. She had lied when she said she didn't care what Brad Steele thought about her.

COOL, immobile, Jessica watched her go. Old Ned's eyes were on Jessica.

"That wuz downright mean o' Brad Steele," he muttered. "Didn't think he'd be that ornery."

Bright color sprang into Jessica's cheeks but she didn't answer.

"Humph!" was Ned's comment to her silence. But his keen old eyes shone with a flick of anger. There were times when he didn't in the least understand this regal, strong-willed child of his. And no one knew better than Ned Leslie to what lengths Jessica would go to have her will.

Slashing at her boottops with her riding crop, she turned to him. "Father, have you renewed your offer to buy Brad Steele's spread lately?"

He shook his head. "No. Shan't make 'im another offer. Ain't necessary."

"Not necessary? Have you bought his note from the bank?"

"I can git it; the bank is allus needin' money."

"You'll never get Brad's spread that way," Jessica snapped. "He'll sell every head of stock he owns before he'll let you take his land."

"Be a fool if he does. I'll give 'im a bang-up good price for his herd. What could he do with a ranch an' no cattle?"

"He'd find something to do. You can't rough-shod Brad Steele, father; you may as well quit trying."

"Thot yuh wanted his ranch throwed in with ours. It'd square it up an' make it way yonder the biggest ranch in Wyoming."

"I know it. I do want it. But—"

"Mebbe yuh got a plan for gettin' it, daughter?"

"I have. With Brad as your son-in-law the two spreads can be thrown together, Brad can take over the

management and you can take a rest, father."

"Me rest? Humph! Has that young fool axed yuh to marry 'im?"

Jessica smiled cooly. "He will."

"An' yuh'd take 'im after what he said 'bout Mollie?"

"Mollie doesn't have to always be galloping about the country on a wild horse."

"Mollie loves tuh ride. I love tuh see her ride. Sometimes I wish, Jessica, yuh wuz more like Mollie. An' yuh just leave me handle this ranch business. An' when that ornery rascal axes yuh to marry 'im just—"

"When he does, you'll like it, father," was Jessica's cool rejoiner as she went from the room.

BRAD STEELE settled the heavy guns against his thighs and rowelled his horse's flanks lightly. His wind-burned face was set in hard lines, his level, gray eyes were peculiarly dark.

He had taken over the Flying B spread a year ago, just after his brother's death and the first few months there had been the most satisfying of his life. But for three months now not a single person had crossed his threshold. Men he had thought his friends passed him with a curt nod or a crisp word; they were making it quite clear that they didn't want him in the Big Horn country.

Now he was on his way to the Leaning L outfit. There were a few things he was going to make plain to old Ned Leslie, owner of the spread and after that his neighbors could go hang for all he cared.

A mile away on the sloping mesa he saw the low, rambling ranch house of the Leaning L and a frown brought his heavy, black brows together.

Along the trail a streak of silver flashed and rippled in the sunlight. Long, silvery legs were reaching out, taking the trail at a mile-eating pace. That would be Silvermane, Leslie's magnificent stallion. And now he could see the rider, could see the glow of the sun on the rich, deep red of her hair. Mollie! Brad pushed faster along the trail. He had forgotten Mollie, old Ned Leslie's ward.

She was one of the two whose friendship had not failed him; the other was Jessica, Leslie's daughter.

But it was thoughts of Mollie that drove the bitterness from him now. Gay, sparkling Mollie with whom he had taken so many long rides during the past months. His lips twisted into a smile as he thought of the day they had taken sandwiches and had a picnic over on Goose creek.

The great, proud stallion was walking slower now, held in he could see by Mollie's firm little hands. Brad spurred his horse up the slope to meet her. Gee! It would be pleasant to chat with Mollie before barging into her surly, taciturn old guardian.

His horse's hoof rang on a rock and Mollie's head came up with a jerk. One arm brushed quickly across her face. She was crying! Tears clung to her lashes and smudges showed on her richly tanned cheeks.

Brad reined to her side. "Mollie!" he cried. "What happened?"

Her hand on the rein swerved Silvermane aside. "Good-morning Mr. Steele." Her voice was husky from crying.

Brad's hand fell on Silvermane's rein. He drew his own mount nearer. "Is that any way to greet a friend?" he wanted to know. "Tell me what's troublin' you, Mollie."

She raised stormy, angry eyes to his. "Nothing that is of any interest to you, Brad Steele. Take your hands off Silvermane's rein you—you—"

A flame of anger shot through Brad. His eyes narrowed and the muscles stood out along his lean jaws. He leaned over 'til his shoulder brushed Mollie's and his half-panting breath touched her cheek.

"Go on, Mollie! Finish what you started to say. Then maybe I'll know why people are treating me like something old tom has dragged in."

Mollie's eyes widened. So Brad was sensing the situation. She hadn't believed any of the rumors she had heard about him. But then, neither

had she thought him the kind of man to make slanderous remarks about a girl.

A leather quirt hung from its loop about the pommel of her saddle. She caught it loose and with all her might slashed it about Brad's shoulders. Her spurred heels dug sharply into Silvermane's flanks. He reared and plunged, breaking Brad's hold on the rein.

Searing torturous pain whitened Brad's face. He sat, numb, watching the silvery streak that was Silvermane tearing down the trail.

A bitterness like nothing he had known before laid hold of him. He checked the impulse to race after Mollie and compel her to finish what she had started to say. What had she been going to call him? A name that was perhaps the key to his growing unpopularity?

Smothering an oath he turned to the trail to the Leaning L. There was nothing he could do but go doggedly on as he had started.

Dark brooding settled over him. A sense of some impending event hung like a fog over him.

THE CLATTER of hoofs on the trail brought him up with a start. Cantering toward him was Jessica Leslie on her jet-black mare, Starlight. What a picture she made in her white habit on the mare whose coat gleamed like black satin in the sun. Sunrays tangled in the gold of her hair. His heart quickened at her loveliness.

But he was acutely aware of Ned Leslie's antagonism and the reason for it. It was only natural that his daughter should come to share it with him. Remembering his encounter with Mollie, he approached warily. Perhaps Jessica's friendship was no longer his.

"Brad!" Jessica cried and reined her horse to his side. "I've been hoping I'd see you. Were you going to my home?"

"I've a little business with your father," he told her. He couldn't keep a touch of stiffness from his voice, though her friendliness was a balm to the hurt Mollie had given him.

Jessica slipped from Starlight's back to the ground. Her laugh was soft and musical. She hadn't changed toward him in the least! His heart warmed toward her. "I want to talk to you," she smiled up at him.

"Then you're about the only person in the country who does," he exclaimed as he got down.

A little frown puckered Jessica's brow. "That is what is bothering me," she said. "I do hope you and father can get together on things. I was telling him only a few minutes ago that he needs a man like you to take things over and let him ease up a little."

Brad smiled. "But what about Anson Walters? He seems to be a very capable foreman. I admire his ability."

"That is what father said. But he says he'd rather turn things over to a son. I'm only a woman, and father is always wanting me to marry so he won't have to worry about me and the ranch."

She laughed again, a soft tinkle of sound. Not her words, but the strange light in her eyes, the way she leaned toward him, made the blood pour into Brad's face.

Impulsively she moved a step nearer, raised her hands to his shoulders. "Brad," her voice trembled a little. "I told father that if any trouble came up between you and him I would stand with you."

Brad stood staring at her. He felt embarrassed and helpless and foolish. He wished he could think of something to say. Wished that the vision of Mollie in Jessica's place had not come before his eyes. If it were Mollie standing so near him with her hands on his shoulders—

He struggled for words and muttered: "That's fine, Jessica. I'll certainly need someone to stand by me. Thanks a lot."

Her eyes widened and her lovely face paled. Her fingers bit into his shoulders and shook him impatiently. Her voice was low and strained. "But Brad, don't you understand why I told father that?"

Brad gulped. "I understand that you certainly are a friend. Wish I had a few more like you, Jessica."

He saw her eyes narrow and grow icy hard, heard the sharp intake of her breath, felt her hands jerked from his shoulders.

Before he had finished speaking she had strode to Starlight and leaped into the saddle. Brad stood staring stupidly while she whirled Starlight savagely and went pounding down the trail.

Burning with anger and chagrin he mounted his own horse and struck out along the trail. The smarting welt across his shoulders made his lips twist and his anger mounted when he remembered visioning Mollie in Jessica's place before him.

He galloped up the slope to the Leaning L ranch house. A Chinese house servant admitted him and led him to Ned Leslie's office. The white headed rancher nodded curtly when he entered.

"Mornin', Steele. Wasn't expectin' yuh."

"I didn't expect to be here, Leslie. But—"

"Come to take up my offer to buy yore spread? Now that's the sensible—"

Brad stiffened and his voice went flat. "I did not come to take up your offer, Leslie. Nothing is farther from my mind than that. I came to tell you that I drove a hundred head of your cattle out of my south pasture yesterday afternoon. The fence had been cut and—"

"Don't know a thing about it. An' none of my men mentioned it."

"There's no doubt a reason for that."

"That'll bear explainin', Steele."

"So will a lot of other things. That's three times that particular fence has been cut. Always near my south pasture waterhole. You have good grazin' on your side of the fence. But no water. Who but your men—"

"Get this, Steele. I trust every man I've got. Knowed 'em all a lot longer'n I've knowed yuh. An' more favorably, too. They'll be here long after you're gone."

"Meanin' what?" Brad snapped.

"Thet offer I made yuh is still open."

"You're pretty thick-headed, Leslie. You can't seem to understand that I've no intention of giving up my spread. All I want of you is for your men to keep your cattle off my range. And this is the last time I'll speak to you about it."

Ned Leslie's ice-blue eyes bored into Brad's a minute before he turned away with a gesture of dismissal.

Brad started to speak again, then stopped. He swung around and strode from the room. At the door he paused: "If it's war yuh want, I'm ready any time."

HE SWUNG out of the house and vaulted into his saddle. Anger and hate seethed through him. Every hand was against him, every door closed to him.

He rode past the trail that turned to his own range and turned into the trail leading to town. Six months before he had borrowed five thousand dollars from the Bank of Milroy with his spread as security. To pay it now would take every hoof on his range. But there had been an understanding that he could renew the note. It was due in one more week and he wanted to be sure about that renewal.

He strode through the door of the bank. Sam Keene, the cashier, was at the window. "What can I do for yuh, Steele?" he grunted.

Brad eyed him closely. Was Keene shrinking under his gaze? "Want to see yuh about thet note of mine. It's due next week and I'll want to renew it. That was the understanding when I made it."

"Sure! An' I gotta 'pologize for that, Steele. But yuh see some things have changed since then. The truth is we ain't got yore note any more."

"You sold it? Who to?"

"Yes. We got kinda hard up for money an' sold it to Ned Leslie. Yuh'll have tuh do business with him."

Blind rage gripped Brad. He remembered that someone had told him months ago that old Ned Leslie's

money was behind the bank, that he had built his ranch by buying up notes the bank was holding.

Well, there was no chance that Ned Leslie would give him more time. That meant he'd have to sell all his stock to meet the note. He'd do it! He'd see old Ned Leslie in blazes before he'd sell to him! Without another word he swung out of the bank. Across the street was a saloon. Brad made for it. He felt the need of a bracer.

Lined up along the bar were several of the town loafers, men whom Brad scorned. But just now he felt that a friendly advance from a cur would be welcome.

He hailed the men and pretended to not notice that their replies were muffled and reluctant.

"The drinks are on me," he told the barkeeper. The man's lips curled a little and he looked askance at the other men.

They muttered something and one said: "Guess we're not drinkin' any tuh-day."

Brad knew they never missed a chance for a free drink. He whirled on them. "Not drinking? Or not drinking with me?" he demanded.

"I guess that's it, feller," retorted one.

"Why?"

"Never hankered none tuh drink with a rustler."

"Say that again! Mebby I didn't understand yuh!" Brad's face went black with passion. Cords stood out along his neck. His hands twisted into huge fists.

"Yuh understood me, all right hombre!"

Brad's fist shot against the fellow's chin, sending him crashing across the room. The next minute Brad went down with three men on top of him. His arms and legs flailed out. A heel came in contact with soft flesh. He heard a grunt and a thud on the floor, knew he had one man less to deal with. Then a hand found his throat. His breath was shut off. Everything began to blur. He twisted sidewise and the hand tightened. His lungs seemed bursting. Tiny pin-pricks tortured his whole body. His struggles weakened.

"That's enough! Let him up, men!"

Reluctantly the men drew away.

"He nearly killed Dick," one growled.

Brad lay still a moment letting the tightness get out of his throat and fresh air into his lungs.

Then, conscious of painful bruises, he pulled himself to his feet and turned to the man standing in the doorway. Phil Byson! Smug, a little fat, and always immaculately dressed, he was repulsive to Brad. Brad hated being under obligations to him but he had to admit that Phil's interference had been most timely.

"Thanks, Byson," he said.

"Not at all, Steele. I really don't know why I did it."

"What!"

"Can't say I blame the men for feeling as they do about rustlers."

Again Brad's fists knotted. He made a quick step toward Byson.

"Don't do it, Steele!" Byson's voice was metallic and flat. And Brad found himself looking into the bore of a Colt.

"All right! But there'll be another time Byson, when you won't have the drop."

He pushed past Byson through the door. Pulling slowly, like an old man, into the saddle he turned toward the Flying B. So that was what they were thinking! That he'd turned rustler! Why, some of his own best beeves had been rustled lately!

What did a man do when the whole world turned against him, he was wondering. Then throwing back his shoulders he rode out of town whistling a rollicking tune.

He was going home to round up his herd to drive to the railroad. He'd sell every hoof, clean out completely, pay the note Leslie was holding and ride. There were a number of ranches back down in the Panhandle where he'd come from that'd give him work. He'd go back and work 'til he'd saved enough for a new start. Then he'd come back here and show this blankety-blank range the kind of stuff he was made of. And he didn't care if none of them ever spoke to him again.

AS MOLLIE tore down the trail leaving Brad behind, she was terrified at what she had done. His face with that hurt, surprised look floated before her eyes through a shimmer of tears.

She pushed Silvermane faster and faster, trying to leave her humiliation behind. Silvermane stretched out with his barrel close to the ground, his long legs flashing. On and on they raced, putting mile after mile behind them. At last they dipped into a little valley cradled by gently sloping hills. Near its head was a spring.

Mollie guided Silvermane to the spring and leaped from the saddle. She loosened Silvermane's bridle so he could graze on the lush grass and flung herself face down on the ground beside the spring.

All restraint thrown off, her little fists pounded the ground as she cried out her hurt and bitterness. Jabbing through her mind was memories of the many rides she had taken with Brad and the way she had looked forward to them.

A quiver swept her slender body as she remembered the day when Brad's arm had come unexpected about her shoulders. He had pulled her against his tense, muscular body and looked into her eyes. "Sweet," he had whispered. "You know what I am going to ask you when I get a little steadier on my feet, don't you, Mollie? Be thinking up a nice answer for me, will you?" Then his clean, hard lips had come against hers and she had felt the pound of his heart against her shoulder.

She had pulled away from him then and raced up the trail ahead of him. But she had not forgotten.

Perhaps even then he was laughing at her. Had been all along. Oh, she couldn't believe that! But Jessica had heard him. She had to believe Jessica. They had been too close for too long for her to not know that Jessica didn't lie!

"How could he," she cried. "After I've liked him so? After I've loved him?"

She sat up with a start. Yes, it was true! She did love him. If she didn't, what he had said would not hurt so. She would laugh and forget it.

It was well past noon when she rode back to the Leaning L. As she neared the corral two wranglers from a neighboring ranch hurried past her. They mounted and rode swiftly away. But in the yard other men stood in a group at the porch. Jessica was talking to them. As Mollie went into the house she heard angry murmurs go up from the men. A nameless terror shook her.

She hurried toward old Ned's office. At the door she met two men coming out. They were hard-faced and grim. She hurried on it.

"What has happened, Uncle Ned?" she asked. "Why are those men here?"

She almost shrank from the furious blaze in his eyes. She had never seen him so stirred. Nor so deadly calm.

"Plenty has happened, child. A hundred head of Wade Nelson's best beeves wuz drove off last night an' two o' his waddies killed!"

"How terrible! Do they know who did it?"

"Yes."

"Who, Uncle Ned?"

"Brad Steele."

A queer tightness closed about Mollie's heart. She stood a moment while the room whirled around her.

"I—I don't believe it," she finally gasped. She clutched old Ned's arm. "Uncle Ned, do you think Brad would steal? Would kill a man?"

"Two men!" he snapped. Then seeing the look in her eyes his gruff voice softened. "I don't like to think that of him, Mollie. But the evidence is quite strong. This rustlin' has been goin' on for some time. Not on such a big scale. But folks have been suspicionin' young Steele right along."

"But he has been losing cattle, too. He told me so."

"A man might haze some of his own stock tuh throw off suspicion. I reckon this can't be overlooked. A hundred head is a lot of stock. An'

Nelson won't overlook the killin' o' his riders."

"But why are those men here? Have they notified the sheriff?"

"Reckon in this case 'twon't be necessary tuh notify the sheriff."

"You mean a mob? Won't Brad be allowed a trial? Maybe he didn't do it after all."

"He'll have a chance tuh prove he didn't do it."

"A chance with a mob? You know he won't! Can't you do something? Talk to them?"

"Talkin' won't do much good now. They're too stirred up about the men that wuz killed. It's the code o' the range, girl an' I don't reckon there is anything we can do about it."

JESSICA came into the room. Her face was tight and drawn. There was a pinched look about her mouth.

"Well, it's all fixed." Her voice was flat and cold. "The men will ride in after dark. Part of them will go after Brad if he runs while the others stay behind to destroy his corrals and buildings. They have agreed that it will be best to leave nothing standing in case he does get away." There was something of deadly satisfaction in her tone. And something that told of a goading anger.

Mollie stiffened. She couldn't understand Jessica's attitude. She had always thought Jessica liked Brad.

"Jessie," she asked, "do you really think Brad is guilty?"

"Think it?" snapped Jessica. "They have conclusive proof that he did. The cattle were driven from Nelson's range straight to Brad's south pasture waterhole and from there on to that rocky flat leading to the mountains. There are men riding the foothills now looking for them. He can't have taken them far."

"But because they were driven over his range doesn't mean he did it."

"One of his gloves was found on the trail from Nelson's, the other at the waterhole."

"Maybe he lost them some other time."

"And a hundred head of cattle walked over them without tromping them? And one of Nelson's prize bulls is with Brad's herd this morning. Oh, I hope he doesn't get away from that mob alive!"

She swung violently from the room. Mollie was shocked that Jessica could be so bitter and venomous. Old Ned shook his head. He was finding it harder than usual to understand Jessica. A few hours ago he had been sure she was in love with Brad Steele. His eyes turned to Mollie. Again he shook his head. If Mollie were in love with Steele, she would stay that way in the face of everything. He hoped she wasn't.

"I don't care what they say, I don't believe Brad did that!"

Ten minutes later she was on Silvermane skimming over the trail to the Flying B. Her anger at him was forgotten. It was of such little importance now.

She galloped up to the door of Brad's little ranch house. Brad heard her coming and hurried to the door. It must be something of importance to bring anyone to his door at that break-neck speed.

A deep flush came into his cheeks when he saw Mollie. But Mollie didn't notice. "Brad!" she cried. "You must leave at once. Saddle your horse and ride fast. They'll feel different when they've had time to think things over."

"Who will feel different about what?" he wanted to know.

"The mob!' she cried. "They're coming after you! Everybody on the range!"

"Well they can come," he declared stubbornly. "I haven't done anything to run from. And I'm not running from a bunch of cowards. That's all a mob is."

"Not this one!" Mollie exclaimed. "They're furious! They'll hang you and ask questions after you quit kicking!"

"What will they ask questions about?"

"Those cattle that were driven off Wade Nelson's range last night and his two waddies who were killed. They're saying you did it!"

Brad's eyes narrowed. "That's the

first I'd heard about it. Mebbe yuh'd better tell me."

Briefly she told him what had happened and all that was being planned.

"And they're crazy for revenge. If you'll just go away 'til they've had time to think. You know how mobs are."

"Yes, I know. But I've not done anything to bring a mob down on me and I'm not going to run. Someone deserves a mobbing sure enough. Only I'm not the guy. But I don't understand about my gloves. I lost a pair that had my name stamped on 'em a few days ago. But I haven't been over Nelson's way in more than a month."

"Brad!" Mollie cried. "I believe you! Promise me you'll go away. For just a little while."

"I can't run, Mollie; you know that. But I'll be ready for them."

Looking at the stubborn set of his jaws, she knew he would not run. She hesitated a moment, then whirled Silvermane about. Over her shoulder she said humbly: "I'm so sorry, Brad, for what I did this morning." Silvermane was clattering away from his door.

BRAD STOOD watching her go. His heart was singing. For the first time in weeks he was happy, despite the danger that hung over him. Sweet, precious Mollie! Tomorrow he would see her, would find out what had caused her anger toward him. Things just had to be fixed so he could have Mollie with him always. He knew now that nothing else mattered at all.

As for the threatened mob, he recalled the different men he knew. Cool, level-headed, clear-brained they had seemed to him. He couldn't believe they would be so violent.

He looked at the sun. It would soon be down. He wouldn't have to wait long to see what they would do. Slowly he turned into the house, crossed to where his belt with its two holsters hung upon the wall. He lifted it from the nail and buckled it about his thighs. He spun the chambers of the Colts to see that they were working smoothly and checked the belt to see that it was full. Then he sat down to wait for darkness.

When twilight had deepened until he could move about without being seen by any possible watcher, he went to the corral, caught and saddled his pony. Then, leading him into a near grove of small pines, he settled down to wait.

He was almost ready to take his pony back to the corral and go to bed when he heard the hurried clip-clop of hoofs. The moon, just showing over the hills, gave only enough light for him to see the mass of the men when they stopped a little distance away. He could hear the angry hum of their voices. And presently they parted. One group rode toward the house. Others scattered to the corral and sheds. Brad waited, hardly daring to breathe.

The group that had gone to the house rode up to the door. One of them dismounted and knocked loudly. At that moment came the ring of axes, hewing at the corral fence. And a little later a blaze shot up in the sheds.

Fury, hot and seething, gripped Brad. His jaws clamped together like vises. He had thought these men reasonable and fair. But now they were ruled by mob passion. They would listen to nothing but their lust to kill and destroy. It would be suicide to face them now. And he couldn't stay and watch them lay waste to his property.

He swung upon his pony. Taking his Colts from his holsters, he fired at the group about his door. Then he dug his spurs into his pony's flanks and raced down the trail, firing back over his shoulders.

These men wouldn't let him be their friend. Now he would be an enemy they would long remember.

He could hear their shouts and the pound of hoofs as they came after him. Presently he was aware of someone riding beside him, calling his name. He whirled.

"Mollie! For gawd's sake get out of this! That mob is crazy!"

"Then stop long enough to trade

horses with me. My horse is fresh. They'll never catch you on him."

"No! Get out or I'll stop and wait for them!"

"You're crazy! And stubborn!" Mollie flung at him as she turned into a side trail.

Brad pounded around a bend. He didn't see Mollie stop and wait 'til the crowd was in sight nor hear her shout that brought them after her as she spurred her horse into the shadows of a grove of trees.

"Don't shoot!" someone shouted. "We want him alive. He can't get away now!"

Through the stretch of timber Mollie flew. The men were gaining. They would catch her soon. But Brad was gone! He had a chance now.

Mollie was not surprised when a rope swished past her ears and was jerked tight about her shoulders. She kicked her feet free of the stirrups and tensed her body for the fall.

THE CROWD was milling madly about her when she could breathe again. Rough hands jerked her to her feet. An angry voice shouted: "Jest slip the rope up around his neck. They's a limb handy jest over his head." Mollie almost groaned. She would have to stop them soon. How far away was Brad?

Someone jerked the rope upward. Her sombrero was knocked from her head. Her dark red curls tumbled, gleaming about her shoulders.

"Mollie Baird! T r i c k e d! By Gad—" Furious exclamations roared from all sides. Wade Nelson stepped to her side. "Listen, Miss Mollie, yuh better explain this."

"I didn't want you to hang Brad," she said simply. Astonishment showed on the faces about her. "Oh!" she cried choking. "I did it as much for you as for him. The law can catch him and if he is guilty the law will hang him. You don't want to kill him. You don't want his blood on your hands!"

"Lady, about all we want is tuh tear him limb from limb!" called a voice from the background.

"Git on yore hosses an' ride," another yelled. "Reckon he ain't gone far!"

"Stay away from your horses and get your hands up!" the sharp command came from the shadows Brad rode forward. "I guessed what had happened when you turned this way. Sorry to disappoint you but there'll be no lynchin' tonight!"

"Nor any other night!" rang across from Brad. The crowd whirled. Jessica on Starlight had two guns trained steadily on them. Beside her sat Anson Walters and his hands were filled. An angry murmur buzzed up from the crowd.

"Be quiet!" Jessica's cooly crisp voice commanded. "Anson has something to say to you."

Anson reined forward, his horse dust-caked and weary. He sat a moment looking from one to another of the crowd before he spoke. "Cripes!" he exclaimed. "I was afraid I couldn't get here in time. You know, men, I didn't like the set-up of this affair. A cow thief don't leave that plain a trail. I'd been watchin' Steele; all of us had. And to my way o' thinkin' he just don't stack up that way. It seemed everybody thot o' searchin' the hills for them cattle. But no one thot of the railroads; I did. I had the sheriff post a deputy at every shipping point within a day's drive. He caught the herd bein' loaded outa Kegville at six o'clock this evenin'. All of Nelson's stuff an' some from other ranches, includin' Steele's. Phil Byson was loadin' em out.

"He was right glad tuh talk when the sheriff told him a mob was bein' organized. He'd been throwin' suspicion on Steele all along. Picked him because he was new here. That's all, men."

A silence like the grave fell on them. Wade Nelson recovered first. His voice, unnaturally husky, boomed: "Men, this ought tuh be a lesson fer us. All I gotta say is if Brad Steele will shake hands with me I'll be a mighty proud man!"

Others shame-facedly shuffled forward.

But Brad stood stiff, hands at his sides.

"Men," he began. "I've honestly tried to be your friend. I haven't known why you turned against me. It took a bunch of town-drunks and Phil Byson to put me wise when I was in town this morning. I'll not take your hands tonight, but tomorrow I'll be at my ranch; and I'll be glad to start all over with any and all who care to come over for a neighborly call."

"Don't blame yuh, Steele," rumbled Nelson. "Reckon yuh'll have plenty o' company tomorrow. And men," he called louder, "bring yore tools. Reckon if we start early enough we can repair the damage we done."

Hurriedly the shamed men mounted and rode away.

JESSICA pushed Starlight to Brad's side and slipped from the saddle. She was once more her old gracious self, though humble now. "Brad! I want you to know that we were honest in our belief. I don't know how we could have been so crazy and unfair. But you know what mob talk can do. Father is distracted; he wanted me to tell you that if you will come over in the morning he wants to renew your note for as long as you want."

She turned to Mollie. "I'm ashamed to say it, Mollie, but I deliberately twisted what Brad said about you. You know how father wanted Brad's spread. I thought he could get it easier if your and Brad's friendship was broken up."

She looked defiantly at Brad.

"Father and I know when we're licked; and this time we're proud to take it."

She sprang upon Starlight and with Anson Walters rode away.

Brad turned to Mollie. She had loosened the rope from about her shoulders and let it drop to the ground.

And because her nerves were ready to snap her voice was sharp. "Well, I suppose you're thinking that I've made a spectacle of my riding again!"

"Why, I never thought that, Mollie."

"You said I couldn't ride a horse without making a spectacle of myself."

"I did not. I did say that your riding is spectacular; it is. It's magnificient."

"But you said—"

"I deliberately twisted what Brad said," Jessica had just told her.

And suddenly Brad's vision on the morning was a reality. Mollie was standing very close to him, her little tanned hands trembling on his shoulders.

Later, riding stirrup to stirrup, on the trail to the Leaning L, Mollie exclaimed "Brad! This afternoon I went to Uncle Ned and asked him to try to stop the mob. He said if you proved innocent he would not only renew your note but he will give it to me next month; then I am twenty-one and his guardianship ends."

She was lifted from her saddle to Brad's.

"I guess," he whispered into the curls that blew against his face, "we'd better set our weddin' day for along about then, hadn't we, honey? I'll sure enjoy getting that little slip of paper in the family."

THE END

By E. Hoffmann Price

Bill Jordan was back to prove to old Gregg that he wasn't just a drifter — and to find out why Jane Gregg hadn't answered his letters. Then Gregg was framed for a self-defense killing that Jordan himself had done, and Bill found himself tied hand and foot by the machinations of lawyer Russ Kerwin. Only it didn't look as if Kerwin was trying to get Amos Gregg acquitted of the murder charge — quite the contrary, in fact . . .

HE HAD a thin face and a good sized nose, somewhat beaked, and alert hazel eyes: but Bill Jordon was not as watchful and wary as he looked, else he would not have talked himself into such an awkward fix. Jane Gregg's crusty father had taken him for just another saddle tramp and had given him his walking papers. Now Jordon was coming back to prove he had been misjudged.

He had a thousand in gold, which should speak for him: but Amos Gregg was a man who made up his

"Gregg's daughter is taking care of the old man's legal expenses," was the rumor being set afloat . . .

mind for keeps. Gregg was the most cussed, ornery, cantankerous, and contrary man in the Palo Verde country, though he meant well—if a fellow could only figure out what Gregg meant, and why. Meanwhile, Bill Jordan was so worried about Jane that he didn't have much mind for the blisters he was getting on his feet. Red, the strawberry roan, had gone lame and while he could carry the thousand in gold, he could not carry Jordan, who was a lot heavier than his lean and lanky frame would make him appear.

The sight of a man driving up with a buckboard heartened Jordan; it was still a far piece to Gregg's Rafter G. He hunkered down and rolled a smoke, and waited.

The man in the buckboard was clean-shaven, square-faced, and narrow-eyed. The tight mouth eased up, half-friendly, as he pulled up and said, "Get in, stranger."

And then both faces changed, though the man in the wagon was the one who made a job of it. The slate gray eyes became narrower, the mouth became straighter than ever, and the jaw muscles bulged. He shook his head. "So you're coming back for more?" He gathered the reins. "That's your business, bub. But no Rafter G rides with me—and you might tell that old son that if he figures the new-fangled .30-30 he just finished picking up at the express office is going to scare us out, he is plumb loco."

Jordan said to Gregg's worst neighbor, "Suit yourself, Mr. Lowrie. I don't think Amos Gregg aims to drygulch you, but if you're afraid of getting too close to his spread, I'd not want a lift."

Mark Lowrie drove on, making for Hatchet Pass, and Palo Verde, some miles beyond. Jordan, nursing his blisters, tramped along, still wondering, as he had for several months, why Jane had answered not a one of his letters from Red Fork, where he had been doing right well, buying several big stands of hay and selling them to the army.

That was the first unpleasant phase of his return: meeting Mark Lowrie, who without doubt was responsible for a good deal of old man Gregg's cussedness and orneriness. The second jolt came when Jordan finally arrived at the Rafter G, after camping at the creek, resting his feet all night, and doing the final six miles in the cool of the morning.

Instead of finding Jane at home, he found her father lying where that spooky white stallion had piled him. There weren't any broken bones, but his back was badly wrenched. He might be up and about in a couple of days, or he might be helpless for weeks. All the Rafter G hands were working the further end of the spread, so Jordon set out for Palo Verde to get a doctor, and happily prove that even a so-called saddle tramp could arrive opportunely.

Jordan rode Alkali, the critter that had piled the old man. In the saddle-boot was the new-fangled .30-30, the first one to come to Palo Verde. And as Jordan rode into the approach to Hatchet Pass, he looked about for the sight of coyote or other varmint offering him a chance to find out if the newly invented smokeless powder was all it was cracked up to be.

Borrowed horse, borrowed boots, borrowed gun—and then, borrowed time.

JORDAN had keen eyes, else he would never have noted the man who crouched in the brush, well up the rocky slope which commanded the trail ahead. He was well below the crest. Anyone within shooting distance of him would be skylined. Whoever he was, he had a long-barrelled rifle.

To Jordan's left was a steep drop into the head of a draw; to the right, the ground rose more gently, but offered no cover at all.

The man who commanded the approach got his rifle into line. He used a boulder for a rest. He was deliberate and businesslike, as though certain that his prospective target could not see him.

"Not mentioning names," Jordan muttered, with tightening throat and suddenly dry mouth, "but an hombre

on a white horse is getting measured up for buzzard bait."

Dismounting, Jordan made pretense of tightening the cinch. Screened by the white stallion, he took the .30-30 from its scabbard, and kept it down out of sight when he mounted up. Though all in a sweat, he rode on as though he had not noticed anything off color.

Of a sudden, the truth came to him. "That skunk up there," he told himself, "is mistaking me for old man Gregg. And the old man couldn't see a thing, that distance—never a Chinaman's chance to use his new-fangled weapon." He licked dust from his lips, and his thoughts flashed back to his few words with Mark Lowrie, the previous day. "Wouldn't listen if I did holler and say it's a mistake; this time, the eyes had better have it."

A puff of black powder smoke blossomed against the tawny background of brush and rock. Jordan, having estimated the range, allowed a full second, plus a wink or two. Then he took a header from the saddle, tumbling to the near side. As he landed, he heard the buzz and thump of the thumb sized .45-70 slug. It chewed a chunk from the cantle of the saddle.

The stallion let out a wrathful squeal. Either from pure cussedness, or because he had been creased by a sliver of flying lead scraped off in passing a buckle, he showed his heels to Hatchet Pass and made for home. Or maybe he had a Rafter G mare on the brain.

The man on the slope seemed to think well of his shot. As long as he stayed still, he was an almost impossible target, but when he moved, ejecting the empty cartridge, he ceased blending so nicely with the background. Jordan, ready for the motion which would give him his best chance, let him have it with the Winchester.

The man jerked upright, rifle still in hand. He doubled up, dropped his gun, and rolled. Jordan's next shot nailed him; it pinned him in place for a second, after which he slid until he wedged against a rock.

As Jordan cocked himself on one elbow to lever in another cartridge, his feet kicked emptiness. There was a crash and a clatter of rocks below him. The shelf to which he had rolled had given away. Clawing squirming, struggling, he managed to hang on until he could work himself up to the trail. The Winchester landed a hundred feet below, and smashed to a finish. Old man Gregg would cuss a blue streak!

Jordan got up, drew his Colt and went forward. Though the slow-moving slug of a .45-70 covered the distance in a bit more than a second, and the swiftly flying .30-30 took little more than half that time, Jordan had a piece of walking ahead of him.

He found the man dying, yet able to snarl and fumble for his belt gun. Jordan crouched over him with a warning: "Quit it, or I'll beat out what brains you ever had! You're Baldy Cottrell; I know you—what's the idea, Lowrie sending you to pot me?"

Cottrell licked bloody froth from his lips, and cursed.

Taking the man's pistol, Jordan squatted to roll a cigarette, and offered it to him. Then, noting the canteen under a shelf of rock, he got and uncapped it. "All set for a long wait—water and grub, too," he remarked. "Well, a fellow does get thirsty."

Cottrell drank. He took another drag of the cigarette, and choked on it. "I thought—took you—for that—old son—Gregg—got it coming, all right—"

"Who's got it coming, you or Gregg?"

The only answer was a rasp and a rattle; the eyes dilated and became blank. Jordan went on up the slope till he reached the crest. There were no riders coming from any quarter. Far off, he saw the white stallion, heading for home. Cottrell had apparently come out with a partner, who had at once gone back, taking the bushwhacker's horse and leaving the man to wait for his victim—the way of the manhunting stock detective, who never makes arrests.

IT WAS CLOSER to Palo Verde than to the Rafter G, the nearest place where Bill could get a horse. And this piece of hoofing would not be too bad. Instead of his own, so badly run over at the heels, he wore a pair belonging to Gregg; they were large enough for walking.

In returning to Palo Verde, Jordan had put all his pride into his pocket. Though Jane had been on the verge of leaving home with Jordan when her father had paid him off, she had not answered a solitary one of the letters from Red Fork. Her silence had been so out of keeping that he had resolved to get her answer, face to face, one way or another, before he considered himself dismissed. A cooling off would have been hard to take, but it would have made sense; her utterly ignoring his reports of good news, including the account of how he had taken up some land, made no sense at all.

Jordan was not and never had been a saddle tramp. He had simply made the mistake of trying to impress Jane with how many places he had seen, and for how many outfits he had ridden. Since she was a good audience, he had embroidered his yarns a mite; not to be a four-flusher, but because a gal like Jane deserved special entertainment. Dry-as-dust facts were quite impossible in such sparkling company. To have remained strictly reserved would have been like going to town to get liquored up and then pulling a stern and serious face. He had not tried to fool her, and he had not fooled her—but he had given old Man Gregg the wrong idea, and for keeps.

Maybe someone had sidetracked the letters, coming and going—but that would be threshed out later. What counted most now was Gregg's having ordered the new-fangled rifle whose accuracy he could not utilize because of failing eyesight. His riding Alkali gave a hint: Gregg was trying to give the lie to facts by riding a beast that, without warning, demanded a broncho twister's best efforts to keep from being piled. Another man, crowded, harrassed, and feeling his years, might have tried to buck up his confidence and self assurance by gambling, or buying drinks for the house, or marrying a girl young enough to be his daughter.

* * *

An hour or so before sundown Jordan dragged into Palo Verde, a huddle of dobes and frame buildings sprawled about the old Mexican plaza. Doc Reagan was out on a call; the other medico, Wilson, was so drunk he would not know his own name for a couple of days. Jordan planted himself at a restaurant counter to tuck in some beans and rest his feet.

He did not know where Jane was to have gone, after finishing the shopping which had taken her to town. When, on suggesting that he might get Gregg into the buckboard to take him to the doctor, Gregg had told him that Jane had driven to town in it, settling the matter.

Jordan went to the livery stable, where he found the Rafter G team. The hostler didn't know when Jane would be back, and didn't much care.

Wall-Eye Parker, the marshal who looked cockeyed but threw lead where he wanted it, gave Jordan a sizing up. "Howdy, Bill," he said, and passed on; then, turning abruptly, "Don't start nothing you can't finish."

"Look-ee here, Mr. Parker, you got any cause for thinking I am back to start things or finish things?"

"Huh! Just aiming to be sociable."

"That's always my aim. Do they still print the *Gazette?*"

"Sure do. Why?"

"Might get a paid personal on the front page, announcing my aims."

Wall-Eye Parker, looking one way, walked the other.

Bill was downright discouraged as he summed things up to himself: *Amos Gregg treats me like the sight of me pained him worse'n his busted back. Cottrell dusts .45-70 at me by*

mistake. The manure fork artist acts like I'd come to steal a horse, and the marshal eyes me like I'd done stole one. Now it's Jane's turn and then I can go back where I come from!

JORDAN was drifting toward the general store when the sight of a rubber-tired buggy with red wheels, and drawn by a Morgan mare, set him back on his heels. The man driving the beautiful bay was big, well-fed, and looked as if he owned the town. In a way he did, since he was Russ Kerwin, who made loans the bank considered a bit risky; and he also had a good law practice. The blonde girl riding with Kerwin and smiling happily at him, was Jane Gregg.

Jordan felt somewhat as he had during the moment when he spotted Badly Cottrell fixing to drygulch him, and not enough cover for a horned toad in sight; in fact, he felt a bit worse, since it had taken no more than a couple of .30-30 cartridges to settle Cottrell's hash.

Jane was so fresh, lovely, and well-stacked-up that her gingham dress seemed just the thing for driving in Kerwin's fancy rig. You could dress Jane in something made of flour sacks without even the printing bleached off and put her in a dobe shack, and she'd make the place look like a palace—and she'd look dressed fit for one.

Her faced changed at the sight of Jordan. Kerwin gave her a sharp glance, as though sensing that of a sudden her attention had shifted. She laid a hand on his arm. Kerwin pulled over to the General Store. His ruddy face registered something other than pleasure when, as he handed her down, she thanked him for the drive, and in a way to cut short whatever else he had planned.

Jordan intercepted her at the entrance of the store. "Bill!" she cried, "Where'd you come from?"

"From Red Fork," he said, bluntly, "to give you a chance to tell me to my face I'd better quit writing."

She noted the torn clothes and scuffed boots. "Well, maybe none of

my letters did reach you, if you've been drifting around the way dad said you'd be."

"I was all fixed and set, and wrote you so."

"Let's believe each other and explain later." She caught his hand, and turned. "Oh, Russ! Look who's come back! Bill, you remember Mr. Kerwin, don't you?"

"I've seen him. Howdy!"

Kerwin thrust out his hand. "Well, of course I remember you; mighty nice to see you're back."

"Took some going, all right. Jane, your dad's all bunged up. Alkali piled him. I've been waiting for Doc Reagan."

"Let me drive you home," Kerwin proposed. "Jordan, you won't mind driving Jane's team? I can get her there an hour sooner, in my rig."

And then Jane cut in, "There's Doc Reagan now. I'll go with him—thanks anyway, Russ. Bill, you're dog tired and ready to drop. Wait in town and bring the team home in the morning."

"Shucks, it's nice, driving at night."

"I'd rather you didn't Bill; I want to talk to dad before you get there."

And that made sense, all the more so since Kerwin was not traipsing along, being helpful in a useless way.

Chapter Two

HIS FEW words with Jane had not only heartened Bill, but had turned his mind to the next chore, that of finding out who had been tampering with their letters. Having suspected her father from the first, Jordan had done a lot of studying on ways of checking up. And when he saw the arrival of the stage which brought the mail from New Mexico, he knew that he had calculated rightly; the delays along the way to Palo Verde had not been great enough to upset his strategy.

He followed several sodbusters and their families into the store. With such a rush of business, neither proprietor nor clerks would notice where Jordan drifted, once he was in the duskiness of the barn-like building.

There were aisles formed by the stacking of merchandise about the columns which supported the roof; there were others made by the racks on which clothing, harness, and hand implements were hung for display. A corner was walled off from the rest of the space. Its window had over it a sign which read, U.S. POST OFFICE.

In the bay nearest the entrance, a clerk was lighting the hanging lamps. The soft glow accentuated the dimness of the further half of the building. Jordan picked a spot behind bags of salt heaped in a bank. The nearest lights would throw shadow to make his concealment more secure.

The stage agent tramped in with a pouch of mail. Hornby, the proprietor, gave him the outbound pouch and then stepped to his cubbyhole. Customers lined up at the window. People came in from the street to join the queue. Jordan after having posted a letter in Red Fork, had dropped everything to ride to Palo Verde to get there ahead of his letter; and since mail was carried from Red Fork only once a week to the main line, he had had more than enough time. During his weeks of haunting the Red Fork postoffice, trying to figure the shortest time in which a letter could get an answer, he had learned about schedules, and how contractors routed the mail. His last letter should be in the pouch. If he accomplished nothing else, he would at least have the postmark and contents of the letter to show to Jane, to convince her that something was salty, somewhere.

Two hours after supper, the clerk cleared out the final customers and closed the store. He lit the lamp in the post office inclosure, extinguished the ceiling lamps, and after bolting both front and rear, he went upstairs to the owner's quarters.

A few minutes later, Hornby, the proprietor, came down. He was a chunky, bald-headed man with a pug nose and a round, red face. Shuffling along in carpet slippers, he made for the office.

No sooner was Hornby inside when Jordan shed his boots and crept from cover. While the ground glass pane of the delivery window was down, the door was sufficiently ajar for him to get a view of most of the pigeonholes of the rack into which Hornby was putting the letters as he sorted those he had hastily thumbed over for the afternoon's patrons.

There were already several in the "G" compartment. Every once in awhile, he added another. Though Jordan was a good head taller than Hornby, and the distance from door to counter no more than a couple of yards, Jordan could not spot the addresses of the envelopes the man dealt off. Once or twice, he fancied he recognized his own handwriting. Again, there seemed to be a familiar envelope shape. Finally, Hornby paused, wagged his head, and instead of pigeonholing the letter, slipped it under the blotter pad of the counter; the move was furtive.

Jordan edged away. For an instant, he had had the feeling that the postmaster would glance over his shoulder in guilty apprehension. Jordan was willing to bet his poke of gold against a peso Mex that that sidetracked letter was the one he had written Jane.

When the sorting was done, Bill picked up his boots and backed from the door to get out of sight until the postmaster left. In doing so, he nudged a small stepladder. The sound was hardly more than audible. However, the slight motion dislodged a box of harness rivets which hit the floor with a thump, and scattered the contents.

HORNBY LET out a yelp and kicked the office door wide open. He had snatched an old cap-and-ball revolver which he apparently kept near the cash and stamp drawer. Jordan, momentarily blocked by ladder and heap of merchandise, was at once covered and spotlighted.

"You hoist your hands!" Hornby croaked. "What the hell you doing in here?"

Jordan waggled his boots. "My feet were a-killing me. I set down to rest 'em while you folks got around to waiting on me, and I bet I must've fell asleep."

"Snooping and stealing, that's what you were a-doing! You tell that yarn to the marshal!"

"You aiming to arrest me?"

"I sure as hell am!"

And no doubt that Hornby meant precisely what he said. This was a pretty how-do-ye-do! He'd not only be spending most of his stake getting Russ Kerwin to defend him, but he'd be playing right into old man Gregg's hands; the crusty rancher would decide once for all that Jordan was not only a saddle tramp but also a sneak thief and general no-account.

But Jordan had learned, during his haunting of the post office in Red Fork, that the federal pen was cluttered with postmasters who had "borrowed" from funds in their custody. Guilty or innocent, the bravest postmaster has a moment of quaking when an inspector pops up. Jordan said, "The law is the last thing you want me to talk to. Ever hear of a postal inspector?"

Seeing Hornby's face change, Jordan knew that he had at least an instant's advantage. "Put up that gun, you old fool!" he commanded, and boldly stepped forward.

Hornby started to obey. Then, seeing no good cause for being bluffed, he changed his mind and tried to cock the weapon. He was clumsy; he let it shift in his grip while he fumbled, thumbing the hammer. A gun-fighter could have drawn and killed Hornby three times over. Jordan simply made a swipe with the boot in his right hand and knocked the gun out of his grip.

Disarmed, Hornby felt more at home. He let out a yell and socked Jordan a stiff clip. He butted him under the chin, and just about lifted his head off.

From the head of the stairway leading to the family quarters a woman cried, "Oscar, what on earth's going on?"

"I got a burglar! Call the marshal!"

Upstairs, there seemed to be at least two women debating whether to get the law first, or to turn out with a shotgun. Jordan, recovering from his surprise at the pummelling he was taking, socked the postmaster a wallop that froze him on his feet. He went bug-eyed, and doubled up.

Jordan darted for the counter, and lifted the blotter pad. Under it lay half a dozen letters he had written Jane. He stuffed these into his pocket. He snatched the cap-and-ball pistol. With boots wadded under one arm, he raced for the front. On the run, he yelled, "You stop, or I'll shoot, you hear me?" and then blazed away with the postmaster's gun. Next he yanked the doorbolt, and bounded into the street.

THE PISTOL shot must have spent all its noise among the rows of stacked and hanging merchandise, for there was no sign of anyone's turning out from the

saloons of the main stem to see what was going on. Jordan ducked into the nearest alley, where he put on his boots. This done, he tramped down the back street, to get finally to the livery barn, and Amos Gregg's wagon.

His yelling and shooting had sufficiently confused the women on the second floor of the store to delay their giving the alarm. Jordan took the seat pad from the wagon, laid it under the vehicle, and stretched out for much needed rest. The way he figured things out, Oscar Hornby, after explaining the alarm and the pistol fire, would not want to make too much of the incident, once he realized that it had been Jordan who had grabbed the sidetracked letters.

The following noon, Jordan pulled up at the Rafter G. Jane came out on the run. "I thought you'd never get here, darling!" she exclaimed, and clung to him as though she'd never let go. "Seeing you in town yesterday was just about like not seeing you at all!"

"How's your dad?" he asked, after sufficient double-action squeezing to assure him that Jane had not lost any weight where roundness helped.

"Gosh, honey, it's too good to be true, us being together again."

"Dad's all right. Just a bad sprain. Won't be able to work for quite a spell."

"Who says I can't work?" demanded Gregg, hobbling to the porch.

"Dad, you get back! You'll ruin yourself for keeps!"

When they had herded him back to his chair, Jordan produced the sheaf of letters. "Amos," he began, "when Jane said she hadn't got ary a line from me, I figured you'd been doing me dirt, snitching the mail."

When he had done telling how he had come by the letters, Jane demanded, "But why'd Oscar Hornby do such a contemptible trick? Dad, did you put him up to it?"

Gregg just snorted; he wouldn't dignify the question by answering.

"Oh, all right!" Jane went on; "but why'd he save them like a packrat, instead of destroying them for keeps?"

Jordan made his guess: "Postmasters are funny critters. Well, by not destroying 'em, he felt safer if he was ever checked up by a hostile inspector; he'd say he just got fumble-minded or something.

"Now, your letters were something different. Most people drop their mail into the box under the slot in the front door. It isn't marked U. S. Mail. It's just a convenience. They've not been postmarked or carried in the mail. The way I figured it—" Jordan eyed Gregg pointedly. "If you'd asked him to burn up anything your daughter writes to a saddle tramp, he'd've felt he sort of owed you the favor."

Gregg snorted his contempt.

Jordan went on, "I can't hold a grudge against a man thinking he is protecting his daughter, even when she don't need it. You let me take your place on the ranch till you're a bit more spry on your feet. If I still look like a saddle tramp, run me off when I have served my turn. I'm not too proud to work for you, and if you happen to feel different about me, you don't have to be too proud to admit you changed your mind."

After a moment of silence, Gregg answered, "I ain't saying I will; I ain't saying I won't. I just ain't saying. But your talk does sound right minded."

JORDON WAS postponing the mention of his thousand in gold; he wanted a succession of shocks to knock Gregg into line. "Let that lie the way it was dealt," he said. "You haven't asked me how come Alkali piled me; that puts us both in the same boat."

Gregg smiled sourly, yet it was a smile. "You're a foxy young liar, trying to honey up to me! Smokey Peters brought that devil in, when he come back from hazing some critters up to the mesa. There was a bullet hole in the cantle and a crease in the skirt. That's what made Alkali kick up. Now you tell me how you set the saddle to dodge a bullet coming thattaway—you are not that thin and twistish."

Jordan grinned. "Ask the stinker that shot at me." He went on to tell about the fracas at Hatchet Pass, concluding, "It was Baldy Cottrell, that gun hand of Lowrie's."

Gregg nodded. "Got that .30-30 with him in mind. Never did like his face. Maybe a gunsmith can fix 'er up from that drop."

"When I drove past, on my way back, I didn't see any buzzards, so Cottrell's pardners must've found him. They're bound to figure it was you that got him, so there'll be hell popping, and you'll be needing an extra hand."

"Most likely will," Gregg agreed. "And I'm obliged to you but it ain't the sort of obligation I can pay by handing Jane to you."

"I don't ask pay for chores of that sort, and I'd no more buy your daughter than you'd sell her. Now that we're even on one thing that's bothering you, you might as well get the other straightened. I'm working for you till you run me off again. If you ordered Hornby to sidetrack those letters, that is all right with me; it didn't serve the purpose and I'm forgetting it. If someone else put him up to it, I am aiming to have the buzzards wrassle that man's guts while I am tacking his hide to the barn door to dry."

Chapter Three

THE Rafter G hands warmed up to Jordan as they had not during his first stay. They were a weather-beaten, crusty, cantankerous lot, like their boss, and particularly so were Smokey Peters and Davey Dillon. It quickly became apparent that they did not know any of the details of what had happened the previous day; they assumed that someone had taken a shot at the old man, and that he had been piled and stove up. And Jordan was going to play it just that way.

He figured that Amos Gregg was testing him, to see whether he still liked to run off at the mouth about his extraordinary doings and experiences. Jordan accordingly allowed that if he had killed Wild Bill Hickok, Billy the Kid, and Abraham Lincoln, he would modestly deny that he'd ever crooked a trigger finger.

When Jordan rode to Hatchet Pass to recover the .30-30, it was gone. That evening, he learned that Smokey had been talking to a friendly neighbor and had heard of Cottrell's death. Dillon, getting his shoulders up about his turkey neck as he rolled a smoke, took a sour view of the future. "Never thought the old man had it in him, shooting it out with that Cottrell. It's going to be pure hell for us, from now on. Lowrie's hard cases'll be worse'n ever to deal with."

Jordan suggested, "Whyn't you fellows draw straws to see who settles Lowrie's hash. With that son taken care of, there won't be any gun hand to pester us or rustle our critters."

The following day, Jordan rode in alone, to get some more screw worm medicine for the doctoring that was keeping all hands busy. Jane, coming out of the barn with a saddle, was heading for the corral when he arrived. Her eyes were red, and her lips would have trembled if she had not kept them clamped down tight.

"Honey, what's gone wrong?" he demanded. "Your dad take a turn for the worse—where you fixing to go?"

She dropped the saddle plop on the ground. Her self control cracked, and she sobbed, "Oh, Bill, they've arrested dad!"

He let go of her like a hot rock. "They done *which?* What for?"

"Murder. Shooting Cottrell."

"Honey," he said, gently, as he gathered her into his arms and stroked her hair. "You sure it ain't the sun, or something you ate?"

"No, I am not crazy! Everyone else is. I was fixing to ride out and get you. They took him away in a wagon; the sheriff had a warrant that Mark Lowrie swore out."

Jordan wiped a sudden rush of sweat from his forehead. "Let's set down on the porch and you tell me. This don't make sense. I drilled that skunk myself, and anyone saying I didn't is loco.

"It's that .30-30 they found, along with a couple of cartridges, empties. And they picked one of the bullets out of Cottrell. It's the first .30-30 to come to these parts. You see now why dad's in jail?"

"How about the bullet hole in the saddle?"

"They say that's what proves dad shot him down without giving him a chance. Didn't kill him outright, and before he died, he fired wildly at the first thing he saw—a horse without a rider."

"Making it look as if he sneaked up on his man, and meanwhile, Alkali strayed out from cover in the midst of the shooting. But look-ee here! He's all stove up."

"They insist he was piled on the way home from the shooting."

"I'll tell those pot-heads a thing or two. Listen—do you mean your dad let them hustle him off to the hoosgow, meek as Moses?"

"He was cursing in words and languages I didn't even know existed."

"I mean, didn't he tell 'em I could prove he was bunged up and plumb helpless, a couple hours afore the shooting? Why'd the old devil let them take him away when he could've rightly said that I had done the job? He didn't have any call to protect me, just because I was aiming to get him a doctor—if I'd saved his life or something of the sort, it'd make a little sense, him protecting me, though it'd still be wrong."

"Seeing him no more than able to hobble, the sheriff let dad talk to me alone for a few minutes. He said he'd skin me alive if I ever dared give you the credit for a shooting he'd always had such an itch to do. And that if he'd been in your place, he'd been shot from the saddle before he could've blinked an eyelash. So he swore it was his right to face this out himself."

"His *right*?"

"Yes, his *right*, not his duty or obligation."

"Well, he's loco! If it's something to brag about, then it is my right, isn't it?"

"That's what I told him, but you know dad by now! He said if it hadn't been for him and his new gun, you'd never've had the chance at that varmint, and if you'd not been riding his white horse, you'd missed on another count."

JORDAN spat in sheer bewilderment. "And that is the man that ran me away from here account I was a loud mouth, talking too much about where I've been and what I've done. First he rides a horse that no man his age ought to fork, then he goes on the prod and buys a flat-shooting man-killer's gun, and now he's claiming a killing! Worse'n I ever did, and I got run off."

"Don't you see, Bill? Dad's had a hard time for years, all his life, scrabbling and struggling, and not making much of a showing, and stay-

ing always around this county—naturally, you'd rile him, being young and having been all over, doing things he'd always wanted to do. Don't you understand?"

"Sure, now. Only it still makes no sense. But can I sit here, taking it easy, whilst he is in the jug for murder?"

"Bill, you listen to me! You're another rattle-head like dad; they can't convict him on that evidence."

"Oh, the devil they can't! It's crooked work. They've got some aces up their sleeves. Lying witnesses and the like. They've always had ways and means, the Lowries, and Mark particularly, judging from what I been hearing. If they didn't have, they'd not pulled a trick like this."

"Bill—that is *just* the point. Since it must be crooked work, your going and confessing would not help one bit; they'd simply jail you, and keep him locked up, too. As an accessory, claiming he sent you to do the job. You'd both be locked up for months, while lawyers squabbled, and everything out here went to pot, and you might both be sent up for a number of years. And I'd be left high and dry for sure."

"Maybe your dad does know what he's doing," Jordan grumbled, as he went to get the screw worm medicine. "But it is making a skunk out of me."

The cowhands ended by telling Jane that it was up to Jordan to be boss of the Rafter G. "Your dad," they argued, "ain't going to get hung or stay jugged. When he is loose again, he'll be finding fault and howling about how everything's done gone to wrack and ruin the minute he turns his back. Now, if Bill is boss, everything will be his fault. Which won't hurt him a bit, account he will be drifting anyway."

Jordan had to accept the nomination, but once he got the crew backed into a corner and out of Jane's hearing, he turned on Smokey and Dillon. "You two sons are as ornery and cussed as the boss. I've a mind to pistol-whip the pair of you. You cooked this up for the rest to side you in."

"You can't do it," Smokey cackled. "We'd not be fitten for work then, and things would sure be bad. And you can't hire any new hands, if these here ones walk out with us. Account no one but us'll work for Amos, he is so damn cussed. Furthermore and moreover, you are duty-bound to be boss."

"How come? You fellows have a heap more experience."

"Huh! We got enough experience to know that nobody but a skillet head wants the sweat and misery of being boss."

JORDAN had barely resigned himself to running the outfit, and with none of the advantages which the position should have offered, when Russ Kerwin began to camp around the house to confer with Jane about her father's defense. What followed was worse: Jane took to spending most of her time in Palo Verde, quite upset about the strength of the case which the Lowrie outfit was building up against her father. Likewise, she waited around Doc Reagan's office, checking up on the invalid's improvement. It began to look as if Jordan would have seen almost as much of Jane if he had stayed in Red Fork.

Meanwhile, though there was plenty of work at the Rafter G, there was no trouble. No fences were cut, and far as anyone could tell, no critters were being stolen. The minute Amos Gregg landed in jail, the Lowrie outfit went saintly. It got so that a man could dig post holes without having another stand by with a rifle to see that he was not picked off. This puzzled Jordan until the answer came to him: to make sure of convicting Gregg, Lowrie was building up a good record. This conclusion sent Jordan shaking a hock for town.

Kerwin, he decided, had fallen down badly in not suspecting that there was something fishy about Gregg's story. To beat the case, Kerwin should have facts. Though Gregg would refuse to let his law-

yer use the actual truth, the lawyer's knowledge of it would help him forestall the prosecution.

When Jordan stopped at the jail to tell Gregg that the Lowrie outfit was behaving, he learned that Jane aimed to stay with an aunt in Palo Verde until the trial.

"Sitting in the hoosgow," he said, sourly, "is sure making a new man of you, Amos. Kinfolk trotting pies and fancy grub to you three times a day, and nothing to do but play checkers with the jiggers in the other cell. Who did you say is defending you?"

"That's a fool question. Russ Kerwin, of course."

"That's not a fool question. I figured maybe Jane was fixing to do the defending, like that gal in the Shakespeare story. I haven't seen hide nor hair of her since you been in the jug. For two cents, I'd tell what I know about all this."

"You young whelp, don't you dare! And keep your voice down—quit even thinking of any such thing. I know what I am doing, and so does Russ."

Leaving the prisoner, Jordan went to find Jane's aunt. The lady was at home, but Jane was out.

"Reckon she's helping prepare the defense, m'am?"

The aunt did not miss the sarcasm. "Why shouldn't she be concerned about her father? You'd be in better business, young man, if you were back at the Rafter G, tending to your duties."

"You are dead right, m'am." Jordan bowed ceremoniously. "If I was in the hoosgow, I'd have a stomach ache from too many pies and stuff you ladies would not be toting over to me."

By now, Jordan was good and fed up. And when he came to the Miners and Traders Building, he saw his chance to do some hand-calling. Kerwin's fancy Morgan mare and rubber tired buggy were at the hitch rack. The red wheels were well filmed with alkali dust. They had not got that way because of their owner's being occupied with the preparation of a brief, or searching for precedents.

He stepped into the lawyer's front office. A pen pusher looked up, pointed to the chair in the corner, and said, "Mr. Kerwin's busy."

"I figured it thattaway," Jordan retorted grimly, and grabbed the knob of the door marked "Private."

Kerwin actually was busy. He had an armful of girl. She was murmuring, "Russ, you've been so good to me—I don't know what we'd do without you."

She let out a yeep, and let go the attorney. The lady was Jane. Jordan said, "Looks like *you're* being pretty good to him." Then, to Kerwin, "I got something here that'll be mighty good for you, you ring tailed coyote! If law school didn't learn you the difference between pawing a girl and fumbling with a habeas corpus, here is your chance."

"What the devil do you mean coming in without knocking?"

"If you're heeled, reach for it!"

"I am not armed."

Jordan drew and tossed his .45 to the lounge where the consultation had been going on. "Neither am I!"

THE BELTED Kerwin and knocked him staggering. Then, hearing the clerk push his chair aside, Jordan bounced for the door and twisted the latch. He turned, but not quickly enough. Kerwin, shaken yet full of steam, came at him.

Kerwin knew his business. He rolled with the punches. Jordan either hit air, or he no more than grazed the surface. And each time he was outwitted by the lawyer's neat work, Jordan took a jab that knocked him stem winding. Getting to his feet after each knockdown was wearing him out. And having Jane witness his being cut up and slapped down hurt far worse than the beating he was taking.

Jane snatched the pistol. "Quit it, or I'll bend this gun over the heads of both of you."

"You'd better get out, Jordan."

And Jordan retorted, clearly as

his thickening lips allowed, "Get a gun and fight like a man, you yellow-bellied skunk."

"Will you get out!" Jane cried, and burst into tears. "Here I am worried frantic, and you poke your long nose into the office, and you have to make the very worst out of everything. Things are not going as well as dad figured. Buying that .30-30 has made it look like a premeditated killing; there's a lot of sentiment growing up against him, all over town."

"If you've got some weeping to do, come home where you belong and do it."

Kerwin had by now regained his composure. "I understand your feelings. But you don't seem to realize how badly things are going against Mr. Gregg. I asked Jane to stay with her aunt so that the people from whom the jury will be picked will see more of her. Win some sympathy in advance, instead of waiting until the last minute. Don't you understand—she has stayed cooped up at the Rafter G so much that she's somewhat of a stranger in town."

The man spoke earnestly and convincingly. Jane dabbled her eyes and said, "That's how it is, Bill."

Jordan addressed the two. "Do you mean to tell me any jury in this county would convict a man on a yarn like the complaint Mark Lowrie swore out?"

Kerwin answered, "Circulate around town and find out for yourself. Mr. Gregg never went to any great effort to endear himself to his neighbors. A sterling character, but not gifted with the power of winning popularity. And Mark Lowrie is spending a good deal of time in town, talking to all and sundry; there will be more spite than law to contend with."

Gregg's face lengthened. "That begins to make sense."

Kerwin thrust out his hand. "I've taken no offense. I do not see why you have to." Then with a winning smile, "If you must challenge me, why not wait till after the trial, when I've served my purpose?"

Chapter Four

AT THE trial of Amos Gregg, Kerwin's clever work made Jordan say to Jane, "I can pretty near forgive him for taking advantage of your being so worried, that day in his office."

"I was awfully upset, and I'm glad you do understand. Russ really has been good to us; he isn't pressing dad for cash for defending him."

Once the jury quit the box, Kerwin left Gregg to sit with Jane and Jordan. Despite his having no doubt at all as to the outcome, Jordan became tense as he waited for the verdict. He had Kerwin at his left, and wondered why the lawyer had not taken a seat on Jane's right, sitting next to her to reassure her with those repetitions of confidence which would ease the tension which gripped her.

The prisoner gave the three a cocky look, as if to mock them for not being as thoroughly in command of things as he was.

Finally the jury filed in and lined up. "Your honor," said the foreman, wooden faced and with voice to match, "we find the prisoner guilty as charged."

Jordan was halfway to his feet before Jane and Kerwin could grab him by the arms. "You double-dealing sons—" But his outburst was choked when Jane put her hands over his mouth, and Kerwin said in a fierce whisper, "Bill, sit down! Shut up!"

"I'll tell them," Jordan tried to say, "I shot—"

"You fool, shut up!" Kerwin raised his voice, and overwhelmed the half-stifled, distorted utterance which none of the spectators could have understood, even if they had been listening instead of muttering among themselves "Sit down—do you want to land in jail with him? What good would that do?"

Thanks to Jane and Kerwin, Jordan sat down without speaking his mind. Then the lawyer got up and demanded the right to poll the jury. The judge, still bewildered by the unexpected verdict, granted the demand.

Each of the twelve, called by name, in turn said that his own verdict was precisely what the foreman had brought in.

The Lowrie crowd did not even bother to cheer. They swaggered out, spurs jingling.

Kerwin went through the legal hocus-pocus of moving for an appeal. When that was done, he said to Jordan, "See now why I wanted you to shut up? An appeal is sure to get us a reversal of that verdict." And when they went to his office to finish the discussion, he continued, "You are far more useful out of jail than in. If you had confessed, you'd go through the same farce that he did."

"He's right, Bill," Jane seconded. "You don't have to prove yourself to any of us, we know your intentions. Promise me you won't do anything silly such as confessing."

"If I promised, and then blew my top, it'd be worse than doing what you ask. I won't promise, I'll just bust a gut trying."

IT WAS NOT until Jordan was on his way back to the Rafter G that he succeeded in digesting all that had happened. While Kerwin was not grabbing for money at the moment, an appeal would run into such cost that Gregg would end by signing notes; if he did not or could not borrow from the bank, he would end by being indebted to Kerwin, who habitually made loans which the bank considered too risky to be good business. Meanwhile, with her father in jail, Jane would be spending most of her time in town, with her aunt.

"It is a pat hand for Kerwin," Jordan reasoned, with growing wrath. "And it don't add up. Anybody that'd ever had a grudge against Amos got challenged and didn't get a chance to sit on the jury. He puts up a whale of a good argument, and he coppers every bet the prosecutor made—only, a jury of cattlemen bring in that kind of a crazy verdict."

Somebody was being cold-decked: Gregg, and also, himself. He could not see how Kerwin could have gone about it, but whatever the trick had been, the result was all too plain: Jane and the lawyer would be wearing out the tires of that red wheeled buggy, and bit by bit, that smooth talker would influence her.

Jordan remembered that even before the shooting, Kerwin had been driving Jane around in his buggy. And now that he was beginnnig to get over the shock of seeing a man convicted instead of acquitted, Jordan began to add everything together. He ended by riding back to Palo Verde. He got to the general store just as Oscar Hornby was closing up. There was no inbound mail that evening.

"When you get things cinched up for the night," Jordan began, "I'll tell you something. Never mind getting your cap and ball; this here will be sociable, and for your own good."

They sat on cases of kerosene near the back door.

"What do you want?"

"I came to tell you I can persuade Jane Gregg not to write the post-office department about those letters she mailed me. The ones you kept from ever getting into the mail."

Hornby began to stutter. Jordan cut in, "I ain't hostile, or I'd've taken things up with the department account of my letters she didn't get."

"Only your word that you found them here."

"More'n just my word, Mr. Hornby. I got the letters. The dates stamped on them would make it look odd for you, if Jane up and declared she never got them. Did you ever hear of a girl who'd not even open a letter, if she actually got it? You're acrost a barrel, but I am not cussed by nature. Who told you to mishandle that mail?"

"Uh—um—her dad did. He didn't like you a-tall."

"You're a mighty feeble liar! Amos is too cantankerous to work thattaway. He gets too much fun cussing and mocking a man to his face; if he'd've done it, he'd've rubbed it in and laughed at me for having got so excited and worried I came all the way back to talk it out with Jane. What's more, he don't look down on me now, and in a way, he is beholden to me. He is just so naturally born ornery that he'd thank me by telling me the whole truth, now that the grudge is petered out."

Hornby however protested, "Well, it was Amos!"

"Amos won't be in the hoosgow all his life. Right there in the jug, it'd brighten his day by writing the postmastear general about the lies you been telling about him. You'll have more inspectors in your hair than a dog has fleas." He got up. "You say it was Amos—so I'll set down and write to Washington myself, about you and him conniving to interfere with the U. S. mail."

"Hey!" Hornby clutched his sleeve. "You sit down. Supposing I tell you who done it?"

Jordan chuckled. "Don't have to tell me now. There was only two

choices to begin with. So when you told me a whopping lie about the first one, I knew you were aiming to cover the other one—Russ Kerwin. He has got Jane on the brain. Shining up to her. Easiest way of settling me was to make it look to eac' one that the other one had got sick and weary of it all, and hadn't ever been really serious minded."

"You fixing to write such a yarn to the postmaster general?"

"Sure am. Unless you do the right thing."

"What do you call right?" Hornby asked, anxiously.

"Tell me about Kerwin. How serious was he courting Jane before I come to town the first time? How'd she take to him? How'd he and her dad get along? Kerwin is mighty important around here, but how does he get his importance?"

HORNBY glanced about uneasily. Then, with the shiver and grimace of one about to dive into cold water, he told how Kerwin had for a couple of years been courting Jane, and without getting anywhere. Gregg had gotten along with Kerwin no better than he had with anyone else, and had bluntly told him that his, Kerwin's, money did not count.

"Said for Russ to talk for himself to Jane, or to talk to himself, Amos didn't care which, he wasn't urging his daughter to favor someone she didn't care for.."

Jordan chuckled. "Saying a thing like that pleasured him just that much more account Kerwin is important. How does he get that way—lawing and money lending, ain't it?"

"More of the last than the first. Look here, Bill, you ain't aiming to tell him what I said about him?"

"I'm telling nothing to nobody, unless you do me dirt. You've done enough already; I lost a lot of sleep over not hearing from Jane."

"Well, I hardly knew you even by sight, and I did know Russ."

Jordan nodded understandingly. "Sure, sure, that does count. And you'd not have gone so far to please him, if he hadn't been mighty nice to you, some time or another. And being a good-hearted, right-minded man, you'd stretch a few points to accomodate him."

Hornby's face took on an honest glow. "I'm mighty glad you are man enough to understand. Russ did help me with a loan the bank wouldn't make. I was a-carrying too many customers that'd been hit hard by the blizzard. The bank was stuck with them already, so staking me'd been staking bum risks a second time over."

All this gave Jordan an understanding of the case, yet at the same time, there was a new confusion. As he left the store by the back way, he said to Hornby, "With so many people beholden to Kerwin, it is mighty funny he could not pick a right minded jury by challenging everybody that was *not* beholden to him, and getting a jury that'd acquit the devil himself, just to please Kerwin."

It was mystifying, Hornby admitted, and then said, "Goodnight."

Jordan however was rapidly resolving the new confusion, except for one detail: he wondered how he could prove his hunch concerning the jury of cattlemen who had brought in a verdict against Gregg, who had shared their dislike of the high handed Lowrie outfit. But one thing was plain: for Jordan to confess to the shooting would mean a quick railroading. Liberating Gregg by facing trial himself would give the lawyer a fresh start. With well-faked nobility and generousity, Kerwin would defend Jordan—right to the gallows!

Depriving Kerwin of his present opportunity to pay Gregg's expenses out of his own money, and in spite of Gregg's crustiness, win a hold on Jane, would not help Jordan a bit. To keep from losing Jane, it was up to him to find a crack in Kerwin's plan, and to get to work on the weak spot immediately.

THE FOLLOWING evening, Jordan convinced Jane that the Rafter G was going to the dogs because of her spending so much time in Palo Verde; the cowhands wanted some good grub for a change. Once she was back, he put his cards on the table.

As they sat in the porch hammock after supper, the first day of her return, Jordan began, "Russ Kerwin finagled around to turn you and me against each other."

"Oh, all right, Bill! Russ had been shining up to me, but he got nowhere, and he still isn't getting anywhere. I am not leading him on. Dad aims to pay for legal services. He's given Russ a note. You've got all in a stew about things, darling—I wish I could convince you!"

"Honey, I know you mean what you say. Irregardless of that note, you folks will be obligated. You're bound to lean toward him, just from having all this business in common with him."

"Bill Jordan, do you mean I'm selling out for a rubber-tired buggy?"

"You know I don't mean any such thing. It's just human nature, taking to people you're around a whole lot."

"Dad could have put Hornby up to fooling with the mail. Hornby'd say what he believed you wanted to hear."

"Hornby," Jordan persisted, "was obligated to Kerwin; he was not obligated to your dad. Then, you can't ever believe that that jury had any dislike for your dad as to turn

in any such dishonest verdict. Kerwin, sure as shooting, picked jurors that owed him money. That way, he could make a fine show of defending your dad—and still and all, be sure they'd give him what he wanted—a conviction, not an acquittal. So he'd have more and more hold on you."

While Jordan's argument began to shake Jane, she rebelled against accepting the idea that she and her father had been tricked from the start. "You're jealous and suspicious!" she flared. "Oh, Bill, don't you see you haven't any cause for jealousy? I know my own mind. I won't snoop, I won't stoop to trickery to spy on Russ just to please you. Do you understand?"

"Speaking of trickery," he retorted, bitterly, "you and your dad have already done your share of that! He figured he'd beat the case hands down, and he wanted a short-cut to proving to all and sundry he was a hell roaring hardcase himself, and still could raise ructions with a gun. So you both worked on me to keep me from doing the honest thing. You're both full of dishonest tricks—face it, admit it to yourself, and then get straightened out, and do like I tell you. Or I'll settle this mess my own way."

His hard words made her recoil as if slapped in the face; but they sobered Jane instead of angering her. "I do begin to see it your way, Bill," she said, slowly. "The next time I'm in Russ' office, I'll see what I can find out. I hate it like snakes, but if he has been up to crooked work, I'll be with you to a finish."

Chapter Five

WHEN JANE left the ranch for another stay in Paio Verde, Jordan waited a couple of days before riding after her. He arrived shortly after dusk, and once he got himself a room at the Drovers Haven, he went to the Chinaman's to eat. He had barely finished supper when a wiry, weather beaten man, sharp eyes accosted him; Jordan had never seen the fellow before.

"I'm Lee Barrett," he began. "Kind of new in these parts; I saw you at the trial. There's a lot of us felt like getting on our hind legs and roaring like you'd have done if that lawyer hadn't shut you up."

"We'd all met in the hoosgow for contempt of court."

Barrett went on, "If Lowrie and other big fellows like him can tack a thing like that on Gregg, they can do it to any of us if we ever get in trouble. There's something crooked about this case. And there's a fellow by the name of Tim Bowley says he knows and can prove it wasn't Amos Gregg."

"Who does he say done it?"

"Didn't say he knew who done it. Says he can prove who did not do it."

"He's worth talking to," Jordan admitted. "Where is he?"

"Sitting in on a poker game at the *Blackhawk*. Won't be there much longer, not at the rate he's losing his stack."

"Mind pointing him out?"

"If you got time to look."

Jordan, going with the man, saw nothing which on the face of the deal should make him regard the stranger's approach with suspicion. The story made sense, yet he had the feeling that he was on his way, not so much to find out what that certain Tim Bowley believed, as to find out what Tim Bowley wanted him, Jordan, to believe, or to say, or do.

Once at the bar, Barrett said, "That's him over yonder, with his hat set way back, and scratching his head. Maybe he'll talk, and maybe he won't. That's up to you."

"Fair enough." Jordan cocked an elbow on the bar. "Gargle one?"

"Wouldn't hurt, but I got to be hightailing."

And that was what Barrett did, after taking one, and buying one.

JORDAN, fingering his untasted refill of red-eye, watched the

man with the dwindling stack of chips, and tried to size him up. He was minding his business so intently that he was hardly aware of the two who took places at the bar no more than a couple yards away from him. They faced the "professor", whereas Jordan had his back to the mahogany.

There was no music in this place, nor any girls hustling drinks. The only sound was the mumble of voices, broken by chuckle or chortle or snort of disgust; the occasional scrape of a chair and the dry click of chips barely nicked the cozy calm of a place where a man could rest and feel at home.

Nice thing about the *Blackhawk* was that you didn't pay attention to what went on, unless you were of a mind to; nothing was forced, so that when of a sudden Jordan caught some of the words from his left, it was as though he had been eavesdropping rather than hearing something spoken in public.

One of the nearby pair was saying in a quiet, confidential voice, "You're wrong, Lafe, that appeal won't cost old man Gregg a dime. His daughter's sort of personally taking care of the bill....well, no, nobody really knows just how friendly she and Kerwin..."

The other, Lafe, cut in, "Shhh—hold it, Mark!"

Jordan shifted. With his left hand, he fumbled with his whiskey glass. He faced Mark Lowrie, for whom Cottrell had worked; the other was Lafe Durbin, Lowrie's neighbor.

Jordan said, "It is too late to hold anything, you short-horned son!"

Durbin, dark and slightly pop eyed, shifted uneasily. He folded his arms and edged away from his companion. Lowrie, though getting clear of the bar, made no other move to indicate whether he would or would not take up Jordan's soft voiced challenge.

Talk and play had stopped in a flash. Everyone was ready to dive for the floor. Lowrie coughed, and made a rueful grimace as though embarrassed. "You're still sore I wouldn't give you a lift, that day. But I sort of feel you didn't get my meaning when I said old man Gregg wouldn't be paying a dime for that appeal—I didn't mean that the way you seem to have taken it."

Under pretext of decently making amends, in spite of Jordan's fighting talk, Lowrie was repeating, for the benefit of whoever had missed his first words, the nasty insinuation; Jordan knew he was being herded into a gunfight in which he had two men to watch.

That Durbin had not cut tracks made it plain that he would be in the reckoning, yet on the face of it, his standing fast gave things the appearance of being peaceful. All Jordan had to do was either start a fight against odds, or else accept an apology which was an aggravation of the original affront. The latter course would leave Jordan nothing to do but get out of town, and stay out.

Lowrie wanted him out of the way, and was giving him his choice. All Jordan's hunches concerning Russ Kerwin's crookedness now included Lowrie; Lowrie, undoubtedly suspecting him of having finished Cottrell, did not want the truth to get around, since he apparently preferred having Amos Gregg's hide. Hand in hand with Russ Kerwin, Lowrie was obliging the lawyer.

While the drygulching of one of

Gregg's men would cause talk, and make it appear that Gregg's conviction was not considered ample requital for Cottrell's death, an open shooting was another matter entirely. Women and cards were the two self-evident causes of shooting scrapes; no one bothered to look for background motives. Women, or cards: whether total strangers shot it out, or lifelong friends, the motive reduced the business to a matter to something as commonplace and natural as thunder or lightning.

Once Jordan understood this, he realized that he had only one play: catch them off guard by pretending to back down, then, using their confidence against them, smoke them out here and now.

"Well, how did you mean it?" Jordan asked.

"Why, shucks, it's easy enough for a gal to pay her dad's bills. Kerwin sure wouldn't charge his prospective father in law any money, would he? You're sort of evil minded, aren't you—what kind of dealings have you been having with the lady?"

SINCE JORDAN was not drawing, they had to bait him on. From the corner of his eye, he was watching Durbin. Durbin was the real danger, once the show opened, for Lowrie was carefully avoiding anything like a move for a weapon.

Durbin's folded arms, his half concealed hands, his edgewise shift as though to have a faster getaway in case of fireworks, all had another meaning for Jordan. He was ready to bet that Durbin had a derringer or "stingy gun" all set for blasting the moment Jordan made as if to slap leather with Lowrie.

Jordan grinned. He held his glass cupped between the five finger tips of his left hand. "You have a mighty generous way of making apologies so they're a rub-in. So I am not taking anything up; I am letting you start the show, if there's going to be one."

"Now, now, you got me wrong. I done apologized—"

"I accepted it, and we're starting all over. You're riding old man Gregg with the law, to make people think you pack more weight than if you used gun-hands. You have gone so far with the hocus-pocus you can't let go. If anybody proved now that Gregg didn't do the killing, you'd be made a fool. I know who did do the job. First, I'll say it real low, so not a man in the place'll hear. Then you'll know whether I am a false alarm or not.

"After that, it is up to you to keep me from shouting it out!"

Durbin, arms still folded, swayed a little. Jordan, noting the hardly perceptible motion, said in a voice little above a whisper, "I killed Cottrell and I can prove it."

He drew a deep breath as though to fill his lungs for a lusty shout to tell the world. Lowrie's hand made a jerking motion so sudden that Jordan almost tried to beat him to it; but Jordan resisted the bait.

He slapped leather, but as he moved, he splashed his whiskey into the face of Lafe Durbin.

The dark man's hand had come from under his armpit with a snub-nosed .41 he had kept ready. Keyed up for action planned in advance, he did as he had planned, not allowing for Jordan's having anticipated instead of being caught short.

Durbin fired, even though whiskey blinded. But Jordan's Colt was smoking as it cleared leather.

Lowrie, the man with the peaceful and conciliatory front, had depended on Durbin to handle things. Jordan drilled him before he could finish his draw. His second shot knocked the whiskey-blinded Durbin galley west. The two, hit from close range, were hammered as hard by muzzle blast as by flying lead.

Jordan wheeled. The spectator's faces show their utter unbelief.

"Didn't figure a whipsaw can work backward, eh? Keep your hands plain in sight, gents! Like Durbin should've done."

The wall eyed marshal came barging in, with Cleve Barrett at his heels. Neither concealed his astonishment at seeing Jordan on his feet.

"Fighting about women!" the marshal grumbled, after apparently looking into the adjoining county but actually seeing the two who lay

clawing the sawdust. "Jordan, put up that gun."

"You should've come in with yours drawn! I'm holding mine on you. It is damn funny, you come busting in and knowing the ruckus was about women. Barrett must've known this'd happen, and told you all about it, on the run."

"What was it about, then?"

"I'm not answering till I've seen my lawyer." Jordan knelt and picked up Durbin's snub-nosed .41. "Look at the string he had it hung from. Lowrie aimed to prod me into reaching for my gun, so's the first move I made, this gent would cut me down. With Lowrie having made a fine show of not expecting trouble nor wanting it.

"I'm a-keeping this stingy-gun for a souvenir, in case my lawyer needs some evidence." He drew a spring opening knife, pressed the button, and slashed the thong. Getting up, he continued, "I am not surrendering till I've seen Russ Kerwin. There has been too much finagling in the squabble between old man Greg and Lowrie. What do you want to do?"

"Go and see Kerwin."

Jordan backed to the street. Though the enemy had given him a way to trap Kerwin, he had to have Jane's help.

Chapter Six

IN THE morning, Jordan went with Jane to consult Kerwin. He said to the lawyer, "Looks like it is a cinch to get Jane's dad free, without having to fool with appeals and stuff. My run-in with Lowrie settled the business handier and quicker than all this lawing around. And I've got such a clear case of self defense that there'll be nothing against me at all."

Kerwin however shook his head. "You probably can claim self-defense. But Lowrie's death does not help Mr. Gregg at all."

Jordan kept up his pretense of stupidity. "How come? His gun-hands aren't going to make a point of riding Jane's dad. There's no pay in it for them any longer. They won't be troubling anyone from now on."

Kerwin gave Jane a significant glance to remind her that this young man's brains had all gone to his trigger-finger, leaving none for thinking purposes. With a world of patience, the lawyer explained, "Lowrie was not prosecuting your father. The case is entitled. *The People versus Gregg.* Lowrie and others merely appeared in behalf of the people."

"But he swore out the warrant," Jordan persisted, doggedly.

"That was because he believed a felony had been committed. A felony, you must understand, is a serious crime, such as murder. But from then on, it was the people, not Lowrie, who pressed the case, however much Lowrie did want a conviction."

Jordan frowned. "Damnation, man! It was Lowrie and his crowd doing all the talking. It was them you tangled up with and made monkeys of as witnesses. If it hadn't been for them, there'd not been any evidence for the pot-headed jury to hear."

"That's all true," Kerwin admitted, "but the fact still remains, it was the *People versus Gregg.* The state prosecutes for crimes. Individuals do not, and can not."

Jordan figured that he had a good start toward baiting Kerwin. "All right!" he exclaimed in triumph. "Your making an appeal on account the jury was loco isn't necessary now. Lowrie won't be there to spin any more whopping lies for the bigger judge with more savvy to listen to."

"An appeal," Kerwin patiently explained, and with growing condescension, "is having a higher court study this court's record of the trial; there will not be any new testimony by anyone at all."

"Just sort of chawing a second hand cud?"

"You might call it that."

Jordan looked crestfallen. "Well, all right, I been pretty thick-headed. Anyway, what me and Jane wanted to see you about is something else. There has been a lot of talk going around, about you and her. That's what the shooting was about, last night."

"Low-minded people will misunderstand one's best intentions."

Then Jane cut in. "I've been put in an embarrassing fix. I could fairly feel people staring at me when Bill and I came down the street. I told Bill that that brawl had made it worse. It set everyone wondering, wagging their tongues. Russ, I have to ask you to drop the case, and let someone else handle it—someone from out of town. The appeal wouldn't be here, anyway, will it?"

"No, of course not. But you don't have to heed gossips."

"Oh, I shouldn't, but after all, I live here. You don't know how nasty women can be about such things. You and I mustn't be seen together so much. I can't go driving with you any more, Russ."

Kerwin gave Jordan a bitter look. "Jane, that's nonsense!"

"Nonsense, is it?" Jordan challenged. "You mean you think a lady's reputation and good name don't count?"

"You know I didn't mean anything of the sort! Jane, you may be right."

"I knew how you'd feel when I explained the truth of things. I was so afraid you'd think dad and I are ungrateful, when we do appreciate all you've done for us."

Jordan unpuckered a deep frown. "Say, I got an idea! You and Russ all of a sudden shying away from each other would make it look like all that gossip actually was true."

"Oh, good Lord!" Jane cried. "No matter what we do, we're wrong."

"Honey, you haven't heard all I figured out. Russ, you listen, too." He took a poke of gold out of his pocket and thumped it on the lawyer's desk. "There's a mite over a

thousand dollars in there. I made a piece of money over in Red Fork, only I wouldn't say a word about it till Jane's dad got off his high horse. Then I'd know it was me that made good with him, and not just that I did some profitable trading in hay for the government."

"Bill, I could throttle you, keeping such good news from me!"

"Honey, I couldn't trust you not to tell your dad. Anyway, Russ, he gave you a note instead of paying you cash for all this lawing. You take it to the bank and sell it, and then you've got your cash."

KERWIN looked as though he wished he could feed Jordan some coyote poison. "I accepted that note only to cater to his pride. If I discounted the note at the bank, they'd collect when it was due. I'd give him all the time he needs."

"Gosh, for a lawyer, you're thick headed. You sell it to the bank, and that proves to the world it is a business proposition, handling this case. That all the gossip is downright low-mindedness.

"That's just the trick, Russ!" Jane exclaimed, happily. "Sell the note, for appearance sake."

"Speaking of appearances," Jordan went on, "I'll stake the old man so he can take up the note when it's at the bank. That'll give the scandalmongering old biddies second notice that defending the old man was strictly a business deal."

"Oh, darling, I love that idea!

Russ, get dad's note right away, I'll feel so much better about everything."

Jordan held his breath. He tried to look unconcerned. He had a hard time of it, not letting out a sigh of relief when Kerwin after a long moment of hesitation got his strong box and unlocked it. He dug out a heavy manila envelope from which he took a sheaf of papers. He picked Amos Gregg's note from the lot, and thrust the rest back into the envelope. Just as he was turning to replace the packet, Jordan snatched it.

The move was so quick and deft that Kerwin stood there for a moment, blinking and disconcerted. "What the devil do you mean?"

Jordan bounded sidewise to evade the man's reach. In so doing, he got the length of the desk between him and Kerwin. "Your money-lending business is mighty interesting. It needs looking into, right now." He dumped the notes on the seat of the nearby chair. "Lem Wilkins—John H. Potts—Elmer Foreman—say, this sounds like the jury that ganged up on Jane's dad."

Kerwin's color receded. His face twitched. He took a step forward. "Stay put!" Jordan warned him. "Be no fist fighting this time. You come any further, and you better come a-shooting." He risked a downward glance, and read more names: "Jonas Wheeler—Sam Eldridge—yep, I'm polling the jury, for sure! You had these men acrost a barrel, and they had to vote guilty.

"First you had the postmaster snitch all my letters to Jane. Then when Lowrie swore out a warrant against her old man, you had your chance to get him so obligated to you I'd be froze out. Ten to one, you put Lowrie and Durbin up to picking a fight with me to be sure I'd not ruin things by confessing and blowing your game sky-high. Jane, you get out of here while I talk turkey."

JANE EDGED through the door and into the outer office. The latch had hardly clicked shut when Kerwin demanded, "What do you mean by all this? Those notes were made months ago."

"Sure they were. You collect fancy interest, and for gravy, you force people to pull dirty tricks they'd not do otherwise." Jordan scooped up the notes. "One man you haven't got roped in is the gent that runs the paper. He'd admire to print the whole story. When I get through talking to him, I'll bring these notes back. And when the judge hears about it, there won't be any more *People versus Gregg.*"

He crumpled the fistful of paper. "So long," he said, cheerily, and took a long, quick stride toward the door.

Jordan had left both his poke of gold and Durbin's snubnosed .41 lying on the desk, as though he had forgotten them. Being armed, and walking out with Kerwin's property, he was fair game. And so, coming to the door, he whirled instead of twisting the knob.

His turn brought him about as Kerwin snatched the .41.

The gun blazed. Jordan, though raked by the slug, snapped his Colt into line. For a moment, the office shuddered from the prolonged blast. A split second pause and Jordan's Peacemaker roared again, and this time, alone.

Kerwin, toppling through a cloud of smoke, dropped the snubnosed pistol. He knocked a chair over as he fell, to sprawl on the floor.

Jordan took a sidestep, and staggered a little. He slumped into a chair. He was clawing his side as Jane came racing in, with the clerk at her heels.

"It's all right, honey," Jordan gasped. "The fool didn't know a snobnosed gun is mighty hard to shoot straight; you got to pretty near jam it against a man's shirt to be sure you'll hit him. Don't need to take these notes to the newspaper. No use hurting the fellows that made them.

"Take 'em straight to the judge, while I see Doc Reagan—shucks, I can walk, I didn't get more than a scratch!" He got to his feet and grinned shakily. "For a saddle tramp, it's downright amazing how much walking I've had to do!"

The wagon flap was suddenly thrown back, and a shotgun was thrust in Starr's face.

HEARTBREAK TRAIL

by Cliff Campbell

(author of "Death Rides My Saddle")

Rance Kane founnd the woman he'd been seeking — too late!

GOLD DALE was seething when Ranceford Kane stepped from his horse before Sam Clifford's general store. He was tired and he was thirsty, but the selection of the store as his first stop in this strange town was in accordance with a definite plan. The two pilgrims he had met in Bennett would be quite likely to call for supplies, and in one of them Rance was intensely interested.

Now as he stood slapping the dust from his clothes, the clamorous din of Gold Dale's night life assailed his ears, the mingled odors of hash-house food and burning coal-oil flares clung to his nostrils, the swirling dust from shuffling boots and restless hoofs settled upon him almost as rapidly as he brushed it away. The day's work was done, and uneven plank sidewalk and rutted street echoed the thump of boots and the thud of iron shoes.

A sharp exclamation in a woman's

voice brought him up like a startled stag. Some elusive quality in its timbre shook him, left him staring through the dusk toward the four shadowy forms just outside the glare from the lighted store building. Three of the forms were those of men, one much taller and broader than his companions; the fourth was a woman. She appeared to be struggling with the large man.

Kane relaxed, shrugged. Some dance-hall dolly, he concluded, and stepped to the sidewalk angling for the store entrance. As he was about to pass the group, the girl twisted her head and gasped quickly: "Help me—please!"

Again that haunting sense of familiarity seized Rance. He halted. Her face, turned away from the light, was but a pale blur, but the panic in her voice convinced him that his first judgment of her was in error. The girl had ceased to struggle, merely straining against the arms which encircled her and pinned her close to the big man's body. The latter's eye were raised to meet those of Kane. Facing the illumination from the doorway, his features were distinctly revealed. Rance saw written on them bold arrogance, assurance, purposefulness. No weakling, this.

"Move on," the big man ordered brusquely.

"After you release the lady."

"You heard me, fellow."

"Reckon you're not deaf yoreself."

For a space their gazes clashed, then the big man loosened his grip. The girl slid away from him to stand at Kane's side, one hand resting lightly on his sleeve.

"What right you got horning into this?" asked the big man gently.

"Special invitation," drawled Rance; then added: "Which, I reckon, is more than you can say." He moved his arm outward, brushing the girl away from his gun. The two men with the big fellow were watching for a signal and Rance wanted no impediment if it came to a shoot-out. For a moment the air was brittle with threat, then the big man relaxed his taut muscles and nodded shortly.

"I'll see you about this later," he promised. "As for you, ma'am, I'm not regretting my grabbing you none at all. The first time I saw you, you bowled me over. I aim to marry you. The name is Starr—Jack Starr; marshal of Gold Dale, in case you want to inquire about me."

Again the girl moved close to Kane's side, and he heard a little cry of dismay as she seized his arm. For the first time he could risk a glance at her face, which was now vaguely limned in the yellow rays that struggled through the doorway. At his low exclamation of surprise, the girl turned squarely toward him. The pilgrim for whom he had been searching!

Kane became oblivious to the crowd which had gathered, never noticed when Jack Starr dropped back to engage his two companions in a low-voiced conversation. The miracle had happened. Here in Gold Dale he had found the one woman in the world for him; the girl he had met in Bennett, the memory of whom had impelled him to throw up job and friends in a determined effort to find her, to know her better, to win her if possible.

Love comes to some men like that: Un-asked, sudden, devastating. The return to the Bar 9 had been accomplished in record time, an accounting of the cattle drive had ben rendered, accumulated wages collected. A stunned boss had bade him good-by, wondering whether his foreman was subject to these crazy spells, and Kane had ridden away on his quest. He went directly to Bennett. From there he knew only the general direction they had taken. Painstakingly he had traced them from town to town, following the heavy wagon with its canvas cover and the two brave figures on its seat. Brother and sister, he had concluded; pilgrims headed for some rumored El Dorado with the hope of finding a fortune.

And now he was looking into her face once more, and under circumstances which at the very least had not hurt him in her estimation.

"So it's you," he said slowly.

"Yes." The warm color touched her cheeks and she lowered her lashes. "I—I recognized you as you were passing. I knew you would help me."

"You remembered?"

A shy nod. "Yes. You held up your cattle drive at Bennett to permit us to pass. It was very kind of you."

"It was nothing. I—." On the verge of blurting that he had deliberately followed her, Rance checked himself. Such an auspicious beginning must not be jeopardized. As he cast about for a suitable statement to span the breach, a man hurried down the store steps and halted before them.

"What's going on out here?" he demanded sharply, and Rance recognized the other pilgrim. "June, they said you had some trouble. What is it? Who is this man?"

"This is the cowboy who held up his drive for us at Bennett," the girl said hurriedly. "I came out of the store and somebody accosted me. He made the man—let me go."

"I told you not to set foot on this street without me," the young man told her severely; then, to Rance, "I'm obliged to you, sir." He let his eyes travel over the half circle of staring faces as though to include them all in the introduction. "My name is John Meredith, and this is my wife."

RANCE stood there staring. The blow was so unexpected, so unheralded, so brutally matter-of-fact.

In that moment the world turned cold. She was watching him anxiously, her eyes seeming to convey a message. Was it apology? or remorse? or pity? Rance did not know. After all it did not matter. She was lost to him as certainly as though she did not exist. He did not even think of divorce: it was not part of his code.

"Come, June," he heard Meredith say. "And after this pay some attention to my warning. This town is no place—" His voice blended with Gold Dale's night roar as he moved away, June, hand on his arm and eyes lowered, walking beside him.

Still dazed, Rance turned and made his way toward the entrance of a saloon. He felt dead inside; so numb to exteriors that he brushed past Jack Starr and his two companions without a thought of danger. Entering the place he crossed to the bar and ordered whisky. Three stiff drinks failed to warm him, so he bought the bottle and waved the bartender away. Rance was not partial to hard liquor, but just now he felt that the only solace left him was in getting soddenly drunk.

The liquor level had lowered considerably when John Meredith entered the saloon. He was acompanied by the two who had been with Jack Starr when Rance had interfered on the girl's behalf. They stopped at the bar and ordered drinks. Presently Jack Starr entered and took a cigar. The four stood talking together.

"The tenderfoot wants action, Jack," he heard one of the men say. "How about a little game?"

"Not me. I'm the marshal of this town, you know. I'd no sooner sit in the game than some dirt farmer would get himself shot and they'd drag me away. Get a house man." He addressed one of the professional gamblers. "How about it, Slick; want to take these boys on?"

Slick nodded shortly. "I'll accommodate them. The back room, boys."

He led the way to the rear of the saloon, followed by Meredith and his two new-found friends. Rance grimaced scornfully. The lamb was being led to the slaughter. When his eyes left the group, Jack Starr had disappeared.

Rance poured himself another drink. Funny that Starr had refused to share the dividend. He did not believe the marshal so conscientious as to refuse to pick up a few dollars on the side. A sudden thought struck Rance, and he returned the bottle to the bar with a thump. The next moment he was walking toward the swinging doors.

Jack Starr was just passing Clifford's store. Kane followed him closely. Starr reached the end of the street and Rance had just enough time to crouch in the shadows before

the marshal turned and carefully scanned the length of the board-walk behind him. Satisfied, he turned to his right and vanished.

RANCE followed. In the pale star radiance he could see a figure moving across the open toward a little clump of trees and the white cover of a wagon. Rance was still some fifty feet distant when the marshal reached the vehicle. A sharp rap sounded on the high sideboard.

"Is it you, John?" came a voice from within.

Starr chuckled. "Not so's you'd know it, honey. Yore John is tryin' to build up his grub stake. Likely he'll be at it all night. It beats all how these husbands will neglect pretty wives for four pasteboard queens! I dropped around to keep you company."

"I can't see you now. Please go away."

"Why, ma'am, that's plumb discourteous. Here I am neglecting my duty to keep you from getting lonesome, and you tell me you ain't home! Open up the flap; we can talk a heap more comfortable."

"I tell you I can't! If you don't go away—"

"You open that flap or I'll cut it open," came the voice of Starr, suddenly hard.

The flap was suddenly thrown back and a shotgun was thrust in Starr's face. Behind the weapon Rance could see the frightened eyes of June Meredith.

Starr moved back an involuntary pace. "Why, bless my soul!" he exclaimed admiringly. "If that ain't a nice way to receive company!" His hand shot up swiftly, seized the barrel, twisted the weapon from June's grasp. Almost contemptuously he tossed the shotgun to one side.

"I like 'em spirited," he said purringly, and put his foot on a wheel hub. The girl called out sharply, terror in her voice.

Rance wasted neither time nor motion. He felt too unsteady to gage in a lengthy tussle, so he simply leaped forward and bounced his six-gun on Starr's head. The man wilted at his feet.

"You!" cried the girl.

"Yes'm. He won't bother you now. I'll drag him over to town where somebody will fall over him and patch him up."

He bent and seized the marshal by the ankles. Using the man's legs shaft-wise, he started dragging Starr through the dirt.

The girl called after him sharply. "Wait a minute! Please!"

Rance halted, still holding Starr's feet. He wanted to be going away from there. She was running toward him. Why must he be tortured by her nearness?

June was panting when she stopped before him. "This is—the second time—you've helped me." She seemed overcome with confusion. "I—I wanted to—" She caught his stony gaze and broke off abruptly. "Have you seen my—have you seen John?"

"Yes'm. He's in the *Jackpot* saloon playin' poker."

She winced, twisting her hands helplessly. "Why does he do that? Why does he risk the money we can't afford to lose?" She looked up at him desperately, appealingly. "Please find him and send him home. Please do! You've been so kind; please do this for me, too. I am so helpless without him." Her eyes were beseeching, her lips parted in eagerness.

"I'll bring him back," he promised gruffly. He felt her eyes upon him as he dragged Jack Starr to a stable in the dark alley. He dropped the inert legs and made his way to the saloon.

INSIDE the *Jackpot* he walked past the half emptied bottle and sat down in one of the chairs against the wall. Why under the sun had he promised June Meredith to find her pilgrim companion and return him to her? He owed her nothing; there could never be a thing between them; she a married woman, he a cowboy who, despite his roughness,

had a code and lived strictly up to it. Still he had promised; and a promise made was a debt unpaid.

He glanced frowningly toward the closed poker room door. They would probably permit Meredith to win at first; by the time the fleecing started Rance must find a way of getting him out of there. He was still turning the thing over in his mind when Jack Starr entered the room.

The marshal had changed his clothes, and his hat concealed the egg-sized bump on his skull. He stood at the end of the bar peering about the room, outwardly unconcerned, inwardly seething. Meeting the cold eyes of Rance Kane, his searching gaze lingered a moment then passed on. Rance experienced an unholy surge of satisfaction. He wanted to say, "Yes, I did it. What do you aim to do about it?" But he didn't, because he had work to do first.

The sullen boom of a six-gun brought a hush to the place, and all eyes were turned toward the poker room. Marshal Jack Starr stiffened, felt automatically for his gun, then strode purposefully toward the door. As one man the occupants of the saloon followed him. Rance got to his feet, selected a chair in the rear of the crowd and mounted it.

The door opened, and he had a comprehensive view of the interior of the poker room. Sagging in his chair, head slumped to his chest, was the house gambler, as dead as he ever would be. Across from him, on his feet, was John Meredith. One of Starr's former companions gripped him by an arm, a six-gun nudging his stomach; the other had opened the door.

The latter spoke to Starr. "Tenderfoot went on the prod, Jack. Said Slick was cheatin' and plugged him smack in the forehead."

"That's a lie!" cried Meredith. "He did it himself!" He nodded jerkily toward the one who had accused him.

Starr stepped into the room, picked up a gun which was lying on the table and examined it briefly. "This yore gun, Meredith?"

"Yes, but—"

"An empty shell in the chamber and the barrel still warm! Take yore gun off him, Dave, I can handle this. Meredith, come along with me."

Glass tinkled as Rance shot out in turn the hanging lamp over the poker table and the two in the saloon. Intense darkness followed, a darkness punctuated by falling chairs and crashing tables as spectators dived for cover.

Rance pushed his way forward, tripping over crawling bodies, elbowing those still on their feet from his path. He entered the room with his hands extended before him, brought up against the table, circled it. Jack Starr was shouting for Dave to grab the prisoner, Dave was inquiring profanely how in the blankety-blanked blank could he be expected to find him in the dark.

"Then cover the back door, you jackass!" roared Starr.

Rance's hands touched a garment. Swiftly he closed, encircling the other with his arms. "I got him!" he yelled. Near him the rear door opened and closed. A match flickered, and almost in the same instant the bartender came through the door bearing a lighted candle.

Rance grinned into the face of the man Dave and released him. "Looks like I made a mistake," he said.

"You picked a fine time to make it," growled Dave. "He slipped out the door when you horned in between us."

Starr angrily addressed Kane. "Let me see yore gun."

"The man who looks at that gun takes it from me," said Rance gently. He had backed away so that they were all in front of him.

Starr shrugged. "It wasn't you who shot out the lights. You must have been in the front of the crowd to get inside so quickly. Somebody in the back did it." He turned to the spectators. "Get out of here! Round up that tenderfoot. He has no gun. Get out, I tell you!"

THEY SCATTERED like quail before a hunter. Rance walked to the front of the saloon and to the street. Mounting his horse he can-

tered to the end of the street and thence to the wagon.

"It's me, Mrs. Metedith," he called softly. "Where's John?"

The girl's face appeared between the partly opened flaps. "I—I—Oh, what shall I do!" Then, apparently on impulse. "He's here."

"Tell him to come out where he has a chance. The wagon is the first place they'll look for him."

June disappeared, and a moment later a vague shape dropped over the tailboard and materialized into John Meredith. Rance was on the ground, waiting.

"Take my horse," he ordered curtly. "Pull yore hat over yore eyes. Don't try to run for it; they won't be lookin' for you mounted. Climb on, quick!"

Meredith got awkwardly into the saddle and edged the horse away. Rance turned back toward the alley, reaching it just as Starr and half a dozen searchers appeared. They halted to stare at him.

"How'd you get here so quick?" demanded the marshal.

"Flew. I can sprout wings any time I want 'em."

"You'll be sprouting a permanent pair before long," Starr told him savagely, and strode toward the wagon.

Rance followed closely, was just behind him when he rapped peremptorily on the wagon box.

"Marshal Starr speaking, Mrs. Meredith. Where's yore husband?"

"He isn't here."

"I'll have to see for myself. Come on out."

Rance spoke gently. "You might take a lady's word for it."

Starr whirled on him like a flash. "Not so's you'd notice it! Damn you anyhow; you've been horning in on every play I make. Bill, put yore gun on him." Rance felt the hard muzzle of a six-gun against his back.

The girl dropped to the ground, looked about appealingly, then walked to where Rance stood. Men afoot and on horseback circled the wagon, watching expectantly. Starr drew his gun, leaped to the high tailboard, squirmed into the wagon. Presently he reappeared, examined the running gear, then turned to Rance.

"You danged meddler! I believe you know where he is. I believe you engineered the whole getaway. You got that gun on him, Bill?"

"Yeah, I got him covered."

"If he makes a move, drop him." Reaching out, Starr jerked Kane's gun from its holster, struck a match, and peered at the cylinder as he revolved it.

"Thought so," he said grimly. "Three empties. And three busted lamps at the Jackpot. Accessory after the fact. Know what that means?"

"I'm willin' to learn."

"Don't get smart! I'll give you one chance. Tell me where this Meredith is, and I'll turn you loose."

Rance eyed him steadily. "Beyond those trees is a creek."

Starr stiffened. "Yes."

"About a quarter mile down stream is a hole. Deep water. Banks are steep and one of them is about fifty feet above the water."

"I know; go on!"

"Walk to the top of that bluff—and jump in!"

Even before Starr could bellow his rage, Rance acted. He had inched his hand close to his body and toward the small of his back. Now he seized Bill's pistol barrel and jerked. Bill's thumb slipped from the hammer and the weapon roared, but the slug buried itself in the ground. Then Kane had the weapon by the butt and was pointing it directly at Marshal Jack Starr.

"Now, Mister Marshal, turn yore wolf loose! Yore gunman can get me, but you'll shore enough go along. I can't miss at this range."

Starr's eyes burned hotly into his. Again Rance felt himself admiring the man's gameness. "I'll take my chances! Drop him, boys!"

"Wait!"

One of the horsemen had ridden from the circle, hand upraised. Clumsily he slid from the saddle and came forward. "This can't go any further," he said agitatedly. "I didn't shoot that gambler, but I won't let

another suffer on my account. Let him go; I surrender."

It was John Meredith.

Glad to escape a delicate situation, Jack Starr turned to him. "So that's where you've been hiding—right under our noses. Pretty clever. Well, Meredith, stretch out yore hands and let me decorate them with some hardware." He snapped handcuffs on the young man's wrists, then turned to Kane.

"For the moment you're out of it. Now that I've made the big catch, I can afford to let the small fry go. You have an hour to get out of town."

"Reckon that's all the time I need. I'll take my gun now."

Starr glared at him, then stepped forward, Kane's gun reversed in his hand. Gravely Rance accepted it, trained it on the marshal, then, butt first, handed him Bill's weapon.

The crowd dissolved, following Starr and his prisoner. Only June and Rance remained, both staring after the dark figures headed toward the town's main street. Rance became aware that the hand on his arm was shaking, and, turning, discovered that June was weeping.

A hot desire to take her in his arms and comfort her seized him. To hell with the code! He loved her, and she needed him. No matter how much she cared for John she should learn to love him infinitely more. No man would be so tender, so thoughtful; certainly no other man could give her a devotion so deep and abiding as would he!

A thought struck him like a blow. Why not let matters take their course? All he had to do was remain quiescent; if Meredith were not hanged legally, a Starr-inspired crowd would take him from the jail and hang him illegally. His death would automatically set June Meredith free.

The very baseness of the thought brought a flush to his face. Almost roughly he shook his arm free of the girl's hand.

"Listen," he said. "You must stop cryin' and do as I tell you. I'll get yore husband out of jail. In the meanwhile, you get some blankets and a pillow and take them down to trees. You're not safe here. I'll look after yore property and bring yore husband to you."

She was about to speak, but he interrupted her. "Don't talk now. We got to move fast. Get those things and go down to the creek like I told you."

She turned away, wiping her eyes. Rance watched until she had descended from the wagon and stumbled away into the dark grove; then he loaded his gun and, leading the horse, turned toward town.

THE CROWD had broken up into groups which betook themselves to the various saloons and stores to discuss the murder. Those in Clifford's store looked askance at Kane when he strode into the place and looked swiftly about him. He was searching for a man—the key man to the murder in the poker room. Not Bill, the one Meredith had accused, but the other one, Dave. He was not in the store.

Rance's eyes fell on Sam Clifford, sized him up as a square shooter, and spoke tersely. "Mebbe you men are wonderin' why I horned in to save Meredith. Well, I done it because he didn't shoot that tinhorn. Jack Starr wants John Meredith's wife and told her so in my presence. He tried to kiss her, and I stopped him right pronto. Starr, marshal or no marshal, framed that murder. If you men could see the length of your noses you'd have puzzled that out for yoreselves long ago." He turned and strode toward the doorway.

"Wait a minute, stranger!" Rance paused to find Clifford at his heels. "What proof you got of that?"

"None. But I aim to find some." He lowered his voice. "You know the decent men in this town. Get them together and slip out to that bluff where I told Starr to jump off. Hide there and wait. Whatever I do, don't interfere. If my scheme works, you'll get yore proof."

The man started to question, but Rance cut him short. "I got no time to talk. If you have any sense of fair play, get those men and hide where I told you." He left Clifford frowning thoughtfully.

Dave was not in any of the other places Rance visited, and Kane finally bethought him of the jail. He dismounted and tied his horse in the alley behind the building. Slipping cautiously along the side of the jail he reached the front just as three men came through the doorway. A moment later, crouching in the shadows, he heard their voices and recognized Jack Starr, Bill and Dave.

"Don't leave the place a minute, Bill," Starr cautioned. "And look out for that stranger. If he tries to get in, plug him and plug him good."

Bill answered and turned back into the jail. Starr and Dave walked down the street, Rance, still keeping to the shadows, following. They paused outside the *Jackpot*.

"I'm going in here," came Starr's voice. "You get some shut-eye and relieve Bill at two in the morning. So long."

He entered the saloon and Dave continued past Clifford's store, which was now dark. Rance overtook the man fifty feet beyond. He poked his gun into Dave's back just as the fellow, startled at the sound of footsteps, turned.

"Turn the corner and keep gosh-awful quiet," ordered Rance. Jerking Dave's gun from its holster, he rammed it behind his waistband.

Dave obeyed. Along the side of the building they walked, turned into the alley, followed it to where Rance's horse was tied. Here Kane searched the fellow, took his knife, then, leading the animal, walked him across the flats toward the bluff on the creek. When they were out of sight of town he roped Dave with his lariat and rode while the prisoner trudged ahead.

Among the trees and boulders at the top of the bluff they threaded their way, Rance once more on foot. Presently they came to a little clearing and Rance proceeded to tie his man to a tree. Then he kindled a fire, hunkered down before it, watched it intently while the flames grew brighter and the dry wood with which he fed it smoked, blazed, and finally became a bed of glowing embers. Taking Dave's gun from behind his belt, he removed the cartridges and poked the iron barrel into the coals.

He did not glance at Dave, and when presently he became aware of the man's heavy breathing he gave no heed. Occasionally he drew the weapon from the fire to hold it close to his face, testing the heat. Always he returned it to a fresh bed of embers. He did not speak; just sat there staring into the flames. At last, he drew the gun from the coals to find that the barrel had turned a cherry red.

It was too much for Dave; his voice came through dry lips. "What —what you aimin' to do?"

Rance examined the glowing iron and returned it to the fire. Dave spoke again.

"You got the wrong man. I didn't do it."

Kane gave no sign that he had heard or that he cared to hear. Getting to his feet he came over to where the man was tied, bent over and grasped a boot.

Dave broke into a torrent of speech, the words fairly tumbling over each other in his eagerness to talk. "I tell you I didn't do it! He didn't say I did! Dang it, are you deef? I didn't do it! It was Bill, like the tenderfoot said! My Gawd! What are you goin' to do?" For Rance, having removed the boot, had turned back to the fire.

Drawing the now white-hot iron from the coals he again advanced toward Dave. This time he looked the fellow squarely in the eyes. Dave was white and perspiring, his face drawn in anticipated agony. He held his bare foot tucked up as far as he could get it, like a chicken standing on one leg.

"Don't do it!" he screamed. "Don't burn me! I tell you I didn't do it! It was Bill. Lissen! Jack Starr told

us what to do. He wanted that tenderfoot girl, and he had to get her husband outa the way. Don't you see? He never did like Slick. Bill shot him with the pilgrim's gun. I He broke off with a sob of relief as didn't want to git into it, but Jack—" Rance slowly turned away.

A half dozen citizens of Gold Dale came from behind the trees and rocks, grim, silent, purposeful.

"Reckon you heard the confession," said Rance. "I wouldn't have burned him, but what he said was true. I didn't put one word in his mouth. Meredith was framed by the man who wanted his wife."

"It's the dirtiest piece of work I ever heard of," declared Sam Clifford hotly. "I'm proposin' that we form a committee here and now to rid ourselves of Jack Starr and put somebody in his place who'll run the town as it should be run."

"I'll take care of Starr," promised Rance. "He gave me an hour to get out of town, and that hour is about up. Leave a man here to guard this yellow polecat and the rest of you get Meredith out of jail. That fella Bill won't suspect you. And if you need more proof that Starr wants Meredith out of the way just make out that you aim to lynch him."

Clifford shook his head doubtfully. "Starr's a bad one with a short gun. You'd better let all of us tackle him. We can walk up on him from three sides."

"Starr's my meat," said Rance almost gruffly. "If I fall down on the job you boys can finish it." Rance was careless of his own safety. He had lost the one woman in the world and at the moment did not care very much what happened to him. The knowledge that by restoring her husband to her would make June unutterably happy, hurt and at the same time warmed him.

THEY RODE back to town together, after detailing a man to follow on foot with the prisoner. At the *Jackpot* Rance halted, leaving the rest of them to continue to the

jail. Dismounting, he tossed the rein over the hitch-rack rail and pushed through the swinging doors.

For a minute or so he stood just to the right of the entrance, back to the wall, scanning the groups and individuals that jammed the place. Starr was not in evidence, so Rance turned and went outside. By this time only a few of the saloons were still open, and in none of them could he find Jack Starr. He finally reached the end of the street and stood in the shadows frowning.

Down near the trees the white cover of the wagon showed against the dark background. Rance, glancing casually toward it, abruptly stiffened. A figure was moving cautiously about it. Curious, Rance stalked the prowler, slipping quietly from shadow to shadow. Behind him he heard a sharp burst of gunfire. That would be Sam Clifford and his men taking care of Bill.

The figure at the wagon straightened, peered in the direction from whence had come the shots, and Rance saw that it was Jack Starr.

The marshal finally turned back to the wagon, climbed a wheel, parted the flap. A match flared momentairly, then Starr dropped to the ground. Presently he started walking toward the grove of trees, eyes fastened on the earth in front of him.

Rance followed. It did not seem possible that Starr could read the faint trail left by the girl's small shoes, but by the time Kane reached the wagon the marshal was at the edge of the grove. Rance quickly found the explanation of Starr's tracking skill. The pillow which June had carried had been torn when she descended from the wagon, and a trail of soft white feathers marked the course she had taken. Rance broke into a run.

At the edge of the grove he slowed his pace. He did not want to alarm the girl, and there was a bare chance that Starr would not find her. He had penetrated the thicket for only a short distance, when, quite close to him, he heard a startled exclamation followed by a chuckle of satisfaction in Starr's voice. A match flared.

"Hiding from me, eh?" he heard the marshal say. "Why, you didn't need to do that. I wouldn't hurt you for the world! Girl, I aim to marry you just as soon as you're a widow. That's putting it plain, but that's how I do things."

Rance threaded his way among the trees to the little cleared space where the match flickered. In the second that expired before the light burned itself out Rance looked upon a scene which would remain in his memory to the end of his days.

June, a blanket held tightly about her, was on her knees, face turned toward the man who bent over her. Terror and loathing were written on her pale features. Then, like steel to the magnet, her gaze seemed drawn by the man who stood in the shadows behind Starr. Instantly her face was transformed.

"Rance!" she cried, just as the flame died.

Starr straightened and wheeled. Rance felt rather than saw the gun leap into his hand. Kane hetsitated the slightest part of a second. The girl was there, her head on a level with Starr's waist. He'd have to shoot high.

Starr's gun flamed, and Rance felt the wrenching tug of the bullet as it tore between arm and body. Desperately he threw himself to the left so as to lessen the danger of hitting the girl. Again Starr fired, the bullet passing over the spot Rance had just vacated.

Rance thumbed the hammer of his own Colt. He realized instantly that his bullet had passed over Starr's head, for the man had crouched close to June. Not that he was afraid; Jack Starr did not know the meaning of the word fear. Rather he found a certain malignant satisfaction in subjecting the girl to danger from the very source that sought to save her.

There was no other way to end the thing. Rance walked steadily forward, his gun bearing on the vague shadow that marked the form of man and girl. Starr fired twice, but he was shooting in the dark at a man who refused to be stopped. Incredible, as it seemed, he missed. Here in the gloom, and crouched in an uncomfortable position, the marshal's skill availed him little.

Realizing this, he cursed savagely and straightened to his full height. At almost point-blank range he fired his final shot; but Rance had seized the single opportunity offered him. Even as Starr's gun exploded, he was knocked backward by the terrific impact of the lead which struck him full in the forehead.

Rance became aware that men were crashing through the brush behind him, one them shouting June's name in a fear-stricken voice. As they burst into the clearing, some of them bearing lanterns, Rance recognized John Meredith, Sam Clifford, and the men who had accompanied him. June cried out sharply, and a moment later was sobbing in Meredith's arms.

Rance turned and stumbled away, blindly. It was finished; he had kept his word to her. He headed for the *Jackpot;* perhaps some liquor remained in the bottle.

IT WAS THERE that they found him—found him before he had taken a single shot. Sam Clifford and his bunch, John Meredith, and —June.

Straight up to him she walked, head high, face flushed, eyes shining. Before all of them she put her hands on his shoulders, turned him so that he was facing her. For a long moment they stood looking into each other's eyes.

"How can I ever thank you?" she said softly. "You've been so brave and kind and unselfish. Isn't there anything we can do to show you how grateful we are?"

Rance stiffened and looked over her head, straight into the eyes of John Meredith. "There's nothin', ma'am. I'm glad I was able to help you and yore husband."

"But John isn't my husband; he's my brother."

Rance swallowed hard. Something was wrong with his sight; the whole world was reeling. "Not yore husband?"

He saw that John Meredith was smiling. "Of course not. We just thought it best in this raw country to pass as man and wife. There does seem to be some kind of code here regarding the sanctity of marriage..."

But the rest of his explanation was lost to Rance. He was not even aware that he had seized June's hands and was looking at her in such a devouring manner as to bring understanding smiles to the faces of Sam Clifford and his companions. Rance was aware only of June smiling up at him, cheeks aflame, lips parted, eyes soft and wonderful in the yellow lamplight.

"From now on, the three of us are hunting for gold," he told her confidently. "I know where to find it."

THE END

ROMANCES OF DAYS TO COME!

There were three women Les Ackerman might have married —though he had not met any of them yet. Then, in a realm of might-have-been, he met all three and found three different worlds, each seeking to use him for their own purposes.

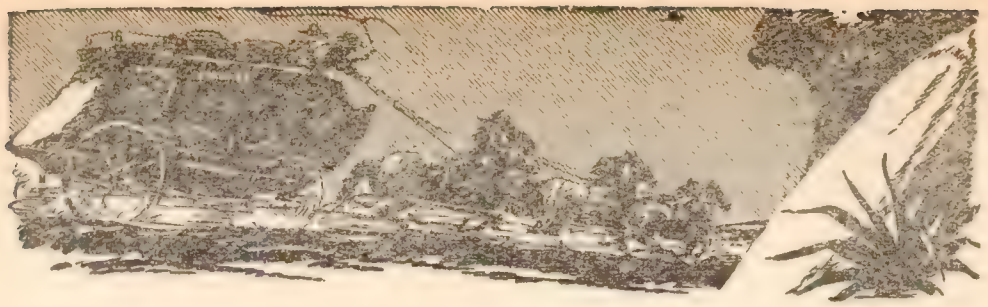
don't miss this gripping feature novel

THE WORLD-MOVER

by GEORGE O. SMITH

FUTURE combined with Science Fiction Stories

November issue now on sale



★ THE CORRAL CLUB ★

Our Pen Pals Department

The purpose of the Corral Club is to help the readers of REAL WESTERN ROMANCES make friends with people everywhere. We encourage correspondence. Just write to Ramrod Pete at Room 605, 241 Church Street, and sign your name and address. We will print as many letters as we have space for.

Like we've said afore, there jist ain't room nohow to print all thuh letters thet come in, so we jist do thuh best we can. Some of you waddies say yuh wrote tuh other magazines thet have pen-pal clubs, but they didn't print yore letter; wal, jist goes tuh show thet a lot of us have mighty similar difficulties. Reckon they all git lots more letters than there's space fer. So, yuh jist do thuh next best thing, if'n yuh don't see yore own letter in print—write tuh some of thuh waddies whose names an' addresses yuh see down below here.

RAMROD PETE

I have just got my first copy of *Real Western Romances*, and I think it really has wonderful stories. I would really enjoy getting letters from boys and girls of any age. I am 13, will be 14 in October. I am 5' 9", weigh 110 lbs, have brown, wavy hair, and brown eyes. I enjoy hillbilly music and reading. I would like very much to have pictures of everyone. I promise to answer all letters. Everyone is welcome to write.

—*Miss Beatrice Expinoza*, 318 *Brazos Street, Lockhart, Texas.*

Will you please print my name in your wonderful book, so that I may make a few friends. I am a Student Nurse and would be a true and faithful pen-pal to someone. I have dark brown hair and blue eyes, real fair complexion. My home state is California. I promise to answer all who write me. My hobbies are writing short stories, letters, and reading. Everyone is welcome, from 30 on up, although I am not that old.

—*Joan L. Pilgrim*, 4894 *Raleigh Rd., Apt. 2, Millington, Tennessee.*

I sure hope you'll find space to print my plea for pen pals. I am a 20-year-old city boy, and would like to make friends all over the country—expecially Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D. C. I am interested in lots of things, and collect views of colleges and universities as a hobby. Congratulations on a swell magazine.

—*Gerald J. Smith* 45 *S. Schroeder St., Baltimore* 23, *Maryland.*

We, the undersigned, are great readers of your magazine. As you were asking for names, we thought we would like to send ours along to you, hoping that some of your cowgirls would like to write to four lonesome would-be waddies.

Although we have never seen the West in reality, we hope that when we finish our service in the British Army, we will be able to get to America.

Well, Pete, we certainly hope to hear from some of your pretty cowgirls in the near future; until then, we will sign ourselves off. Sincerely,

—22272849 *Pte Colin Andrews*
—22264802 *Pte Bertie Allen*
—22218047 *Pte Johnny Foy*
—22130956 *Pte Jimmy Lindsay*
'C' Company, 1st Bn The K.O.S.B., British Army Post Office 1, Hong Kong.

I would like to join your group of pen pals, as I am eager to make new friends.

I am a U. S. Marine, 19 years old. I am 5''7" tall, weigh 140 lbs, have brown hair and brown eyes. My looks will pass. Baseball is my favorite sport, and I love dancing. I am going overseas soon and would like to correspond with girls and boys my own age or under. I promise to answer all letters, and will exchange snapshots if desired.

—Pfc Vernon L. Young 1092329, *Headquarters Rear Echelon, 1st Marine Division, F.M.F., Camp Joseph H. Pendleton, Ocenside, California.*

We are a young married couple with a baby boy, live in a trailer house which we pull with a truck, when we have some place to go, and we would like to hear from persons living on farms where the wind and sand doesn't blow. At times it is very dusty here, but usually, the days are invigorating, sunny and cloudless, while the nights are delightful. It gets hot here in summer, but the humidity is not so bad as in other places.

Anyone who is lonesome—write to us, and you will receive an answer to each letter written.

—Mr. & Mrs. Jesse Pickering, 1401 *E. 10th Street, El Paso, Texas.*

Writing to different ones in your "Corral", and not receiving any answers, I decided it would be best to write in to you, and see if I could have my letter published; then, perhaps someone will write to me, for I have full intentions of answering every letter I get.

I am 5' 2", have grey-blue eyes, am in my thirties, have medium brown hair, am of Czech parentage, and can speak the language fluently. My hobbies are collecting salt & pepper shakers, and miniature objects, sets of miniature dogs, cats, etc. If you pen pals help me with my collections, I'll be glad to help you with yours.

To the first hundred who write me. I will send a nice souvenir—so come on pals —do fill my mailbox.

—Rose B. Stanton 1451 *West 3rd., Davenport, Iowa.*

I have read my first copy of *Real Western Romances,* and find I enjoyed the stories far more than I have those in some other western romance magazines. I'm single, 24, 5' 1½", have brown hair and dark brown eyes. I'm the mother of two little girls, 4 and 7 years old respectively. I'm leaving the Northwest real soon to go back to my home town, which is Bernardino, in the southern part of California. I'd love to hear from anyone, anywhere. Once I'm home, I won't be getting much mail, and I'd like to receive letters very much. So won't some of you gals and guys drop me a line or so. My friends call me "Midge". Hope to hear from some of you soon.

—Marguerite Capelle, 1095 *5th Street, San Bernardino, California.*

I'm a'hankerin' to have some pen pals, so I'm a'wishin' that you'd print this in your Corral Club. Being as you'd probably like a little information about me, here goes: this is my senior year in high school. I'm 18, am about 6' tall, weigh about 130, have carrot-top hair, blue-grey eyes—and there you have it.

Hobbies: writing poems, articles, fillers, etc; designing; corresponding; singing; acting; tickling the ivories; reading; contesting; interior decorating; hiking; skating; travelling; camping; movies; and collecting loud ties. This year I organized a quintet, "The Melody Masters". In addition to singing with the group, I was also manager. We've just finished out our season, and we all had a lot of fun.

Covington is a small agricultural community of about 1000 inhabitants, and is situated among wheat fields and oil derricks. You've probably heard or read about this region, since it's been written about quite a bit.

I was editor of our school paper, "The Wildcat", this year, and I also edit the "Scribbler", a small magazine for young writers.

This year, I held several school and church offices, was a delegate to the Student County, and participated in four speech tournaments.

My taste in the opposite sex runs to any female who is attractive, has a pleasant personality, and something in the upper story besides water. Oh yes—I was also lucky enough to have the lead in our senior play this year, and it was a smash hit.

I will probably be working in Washington, D. C. for the summer months, or I'll be in college in the fall, majoring in journalism. If I'm in the capitol, I'll tell you all about life in the big city. And if I'm in college, I'll tell you about that in my letters.

I'd like to hear from people interested in the same things I am.

—Harry L. Clark, Box 283, *Covington, Oklahoma.*

I've just finished my first issue of *Real Western Romances,* and think that it is tops. I'll appreciate it very much if you will print my letter in the Corral Club, 'cause I sure would like some pen pals.

I'm a sixteen-year old girl with naturally curly brown hair, and blue eyes. I enjoy all sports, and especially enjoy listening to the radio. I promise to answer all who write—boys and girl of any age.

—Glenda Cleveland, 59 *Gould Street, Whistle, Alabama.*

The Devil's Marker

Thrilling Feature Novel

by J. J. Mathews

Bud Grayson came back to fight for his friends and himself, to crush the brutal power of McKinney in this country. But seeing Neva McKinney made Bud forget his mission—long enough to find that winning would cost him dearly. Then came the tragedy that threw the girl on to his side against a common enemy. But he knew that her hatred for him was just being held in abeyance . . .

A MAN with a knife in his hand crawled along the high 'dobe wall, peered down at the two people with glittering eyes. Brad Grayson leaned toward the girl, entranced, forgetting the harsh duty that had brought him back to Sonrisa Valley. The girl's fingers touched the guitar strings caressingly in the moonlight, in the corner of the patio. There was fragrance of honeysuckle vines: salt-cedar bushes, like a silken veil almost hiding them. Inside the big 'dobe house, a guitar and banjo were hot on *The Arkansas Traveler;* "Big-Foot" Hayden was calling figures with endless rhymes. Dancers whirled, trotted, milled, laughed.

Out here, Neva's guitar, a babbling little acequia; and a man inching along the dobe wall that enclosed the patio. The swarthy one saw the cowboy's broad back, bending over the girl, and came to his knees, slowly. Took his knife point in his fingers. Brought it back.

For a bare moment he paused. The cowboy was taking the girl into his arms. Juan Bueno envied the way he did it—quickly, almost fiercely. Now she was giving him her lips, a tall, queenly girl, lovely. Dark, wavy hair and coal-black eyes. And she did not belong to the cowboy; Ramon Brandon was going to marry her, so everybody was saying.

Brad's powerful arms gripped Neva tighter. She tore her lips from his, tried to break loose from his arms. He laughed, low and easy, yet with something like fierceness in his manner. He had met Neva McKinney only yesterday, had fallen recklessly in love with her. He forgot for a day that she was a rich cowman's daughter, and that he was her enemy. Nevertheless, Brad had refrained from making his presence known to the Valley homesteaders, whom he had come to help. A wild, ecstatic thing was choking him, lifting him into unreal exultation.

Her guitar fell to the ground. Brad stepped squarely into the middle of it. Mingled with the sound of the frail crashing, there came a low thud; something glimmered in the moonlight, struck the opposite corner wall, dropped to the ground. Only his chance stepping aside had saved his back. Brad hooked an arm about Neva, took her crashing to the ground with him in instinctive reaction. Neva let escape a scream, although she was trying to smother it. Now Brad saw the knife lying harmless on the ground.

But another might follow—or a bullet. He twisted his head about, trying to locate the knife thrower. Gravel trickled from atop the 'dobe wall. His eye flashed upward, and he caught sight of another knife lifting

The shadowy figure made ready to hurl the knife . . .

for the throw. Brad had left his Colt on the front porch, out of politeness, as had all other guests who came armed.

The knife slithered downward, hard. If he dodged, it might get the girl; Brad threw both feet into the air, trying to shield off the death-dealing blade. The point struck his bootsole, cut through into his foot slightly. He leaped up, took a running start for the 'dobe wall. The man atop the wall rolled off. Brad failed to gain the top. He had to try to scramble up through aid of the salt-cedar bushes.

A MAN came running up behind. Don Ramon Brandon. It seemed to Brad as though Brandon had been too near for such prompt arrival, even had he been able to hear Neva's subdued scream from the house.

"Somebody trying to attack you, Neva!" Brandon exclaimed. "Or a thief you surprised."

Brandon whipped a gun from a Wes Hardin holster under his left arm, and fired into the bushes. The bullets crashed against the wall close by Brad. One hot lead slug burned a light furrow across Brad's thigh; another hit him shallowly in the lower left side. Brandon could have been sincere in trying to defend the girl. But Brad did not think he was.

Brad fell headlong to the ground. The fifth and sixth shots crashed over him. Then, like a tiger coming out of the bush, Brad charged for Brandon before the man could get his gun reloaded. Brandon, six feet three, must have weighed over two hundred pounds. He was a handsome specimen of Irish-Spanish mixture, coal-black hair and eyes. Earlier in the evening Brad had seen that the Don resented his attentions to Neva.

Don Ramon stood his ground and crashed the emptied pistol down on Brad's head. Brad caught the blow on his left elbow; it nearly paralyzed the arm. He managed to keep the arm up, however, while his right swung furiously at Ramon's jaw. He landed. Ramon hit him again with the gun. Brad recovered the use of his arm, tore into Ramon, took him crashing to the earth. They rolled over twice, lodged against a barrel cactus. Ramon on top. Excited people were pouring from the big Cross Nine ranch house.

Brad heaved, whirled his feet, heaved again, turned Ramon. The Don broke away from him. Both leaped up. Brad cracked a fist square under Ramon's eye, then landed that terrific right again, sent Ramon crashing b a c k w a r d. Maddened, Ramon leaped up and charged with all the fury of a wounded bear. He battered Brad backward. The cowboy sidestepped, ducked, let Ramon have one flush on the mouth. Another to the paunch. Then back onto the chin. Ramon fell across the barrel cactus; the hard, fish-hook barbs prevented him from breaking away from it.

Men rushed in to stop Brad. Rancher McKinney had invited to his dance only townspeople and friends the family had made since he moved into the Valley a month before; not a homesteader was here. Five men seized Brad, pinned him back against the wall. McKinney himself, crippled by a fall with a horse, hobbled out before Brad. A thin, spare man, six feet tall. Iron-willed, proud. Perhaps too prone to ride roughshod over all opposition. "Who are you?" he demanded of Brad.

"Just now," Brad answered, "I seemed to be a traget for some knife thrower. There could be only one reason, too, why anybody here would want to knife me."

"Are you insultin' my guests?" McKinney flared back.

Neva interrupted to affirm, "Somebody did throw two knives at him, papa. I've heard that Juan Bueno is quite a knife thrower."

"You came here uninvited," McKinney insisted to Brad. "You said your name was Bradford. Now I doubt it, and I've a mind to throw you in jail till I find out what brought you here."

Brad's hackles began to stand up; he didn't like McKinney's attitude even if he was Neva's father. Somebody had helped Don Ramon get off the cactus. Now the Don came up. He amazed Brad by saying, "I beg your pardon a thousand times, stranger. I mistook you for an intruder."

DON RAMON thrust out his hand. Brad didn't take it; he didn't like that smooth, oily voice. There was murder behind it. This Ramon Brandon came of a family of high standing in New Mexico. Eduardo Ruiz, his grandfather, had been a ruler before the Americans ever came in. He had looked rather condescendingly on the marriage of his daughter, Ramon's mother, to wealthy Mike Brandon. True, Ramon had run through most of the fortune left him. But he had a brother in the U. S. Senate. Congress had a commission on its way here now to settle the dangerous boundary dispute between McKinney and the homesteaders.

McKinney had bought the entire holdings of the Ruiz land grant from

the Brandon brothers; Senator Brandon was fulfilling his promise to make the title stick. For a long time it had been thought that most of Sonrisa valley did not belong in the grant, and the Government had allowed homesteading to be done. But now, with powerful forces at work in Washington, it looked as though rich Bob McKinney was going to throw every homesteader out of the valley. At least the homesteaders feared that the Commission would come in with prejudices against them.

"My friend," Ramon repeated, "I said I apologize."

Ramon's hand was still held out toward Brad. But it was not in Brad to play the hypocrite; that was what Ramon was doing. Brad was almost certain now that Ramon had stolen out and hired the knifer to come and kill him, after he saw Brad go into the patio with Neva. It was common talk that Ramon was going to get his land holdings back by marrying the lovely Neva.

Brad knew his refusal to take Ramon's hand would only strengthen Ramon with McKinney. McKinney obviously favored Ramon, brother of the senator. It might also turn Neva herself entirely back to Ramon. But Brad had been sure she was not in love with Ramon. Brad continued to ignore Ramon's hand, and turned to Neva. "I apologize to you—for—for whatever I shouldn't have done," he said to her.

That was for the sudden madness when he had pulled her into his arms, without justification except the intoxicating beauty of her and the night. "Bradford is only part of my name," he announced to everybody. "The rest of it is Grayson. Brad Grayson."

"Brad Grayson!" McKinney exclaimed.

That told plenty. Brad Grayson gun-fighter, then deputy sheriff in Catron County. Three notches on his Colt handle. Born in a squatter's cabin at the head of Sonrisa. Absent since he was fifteen. Now back to lead the fight for the homesteaders. Some of the settlers had made the mistake of boasting of what Brad was going to do for them.

When Brad announced his name, he saw a change creep over Neva's face. It made her look more like her fighting father. Jets of moonlight seemed to spit from her black eyes. Her lips parted, as if she might speak. Then she whirled and started for the house. Brad knew at once that she had condemned him as a spy. A spy who made love hastily, too boldly.

"Ramon," McKinney ordered, "take him in charge, and send for the sheriff."

Brad knew instantly what Ramon Brandon would do with him, given the opportunity. In addition to the fate in store for him as a captive, this escapade on his part would do the homesteaders considerable harm when retold by Ramon and McKinney.

Two men had hold of Brad's arms. Suddenly he gave a hard downward surge and twist, tripped one of the men. Tore loose from the other. He dived at Ramon, socked him a terrific blow on the chin. Ramon's teeth popped together. Brad crashed him to the ground, leaped over his body. Streaked it for the same back door into which Neva was just passing.

Only two of the guests had taken the trouble to go get guns when the excitement brought everybody hurrying into the patio. Now they could not well shoot at the escaping Brad without grave danger of hitting people in the crowd. Brad was dashing through the onlookers. He knocked down a man who tried to block his way, shook off a would-be tackler. Women and girls opened up a path for him.

As he hit the back porch one man cut loose at him with a gun. The slug cracked hard against the whitewashed wall. Another splintered the door jamb as Brad leaped into the big room where the dance had been going on. Neva was midway in the room. She whirled to face Brad, but she didn't try to stop him. Brad raced past her. But his eyes met hers, held them for a fleeting second. "I meant it—that kiss!" he exclaimed in low, earnest voice.

He kept on running, but in the fraction of a second in which his

Neva McKinney

head turned while he ran, he saw little flames of fire in her large, black eyes. Yet somehow it was not absolutely all anger and condemnation in those eyes. He didn't know what it was, in such a brief flash.

Heavy feet hit the porch behind him. Brad ran on through the front door, seized his six-shooter belt on the outside wall. Too light; his gun was gone. He grabbed for other holsters. Got a belt and gun, dashed for the horses at the hitchrack. "Booter," his own dapple gray, snorted at his running approach. Brad forked him, spurred off. He kept the other horses between him and the men rushed out through the house.

Chapter Two

THE McKinney house was on the edge of Pueblito, only town in the valley. Pueblito had only a store and a dozen houses. Brad clattered up the valley road, then decided rashly to go back; it was high time for him to start work for the homesteaders. Besides, he wanted to nail that knife thrower's hide unmistakably against Ramon Brandon's door this very night. Too dangerous to let it ride. Neva might marry the skunk even tomorow, now that the cunning Ramon had contrived to get the better of the situation back there in the patio.

Pursuing hoofs beat the ground behind him. Brad gigged his horse down the lane. Where the lane fences gave way to open range, he cut off onto the rising ground, topped the low ridge, sure that he would be glimpsed when he silhouetted himself on the skyline.

Just over the ridge, he slowed to a trot and swung back for Pueblito. He was within pistol range of the first house when he heard the pursuers thundering on up the smaller arroyo. He left his horse behind the tiny Mexican church, and made straight for the house of Juan Bueno. Neva had named him as the knife thrower.

Brad eased up behind the two-room 'dobe hovel. Ill smells met his nostrils. A dog growled, barked. Brad stopped, hugged down low. No light was in the Mexican house, not a stir. Brad was relieved to discover that the dog was barking off in front of the house. He hurried up, put his ear close to the broken window pane.

"Somebody is coming," he heard a woman's Spanish words within.

"I have a shotgun," her man answered.

Juan's tread moved across the floor. He had shoes on. That, when there was no light, betrayed guilt. Juan got his gun, ran back to the bed. Smart, this killer; he dropped off his shoes. The dog was barking angrily out front. Several other dogs were barking in general excitement over the town, however, so this one would attract no special attention.

An imperative knock came at the front door. Juan and his woman did not answer. A louder knock. Juan demanded sleepily, "*Que quiere*—what do you want?"

Neva's voice answered, "Light a lamp, Juan; I want to see you."

Juan and his woman whispered. When the light flared up, Juan had

his hair tousled and Antonia, his wife, had on only her chemise. "Let me see your two knives, Juan," Neva demanded, stepped into the room.

Juan was taken aback. "Why, Senorita," he stammered, "I—I sold heem both knife; we ees need money bad."

"Don't lie to me, Juan! Who hired you to kill Brad Grayson?"

"I—Senorita, *no sabe.*"

"Yes, you do *sabe.* Who hired you?"

"I am eennocent," with heavy accent on last syllable.

Juan's wife joined in protesting that they had been asleep for hours. Neva seemed unconvinced. Suddenly she bluffed, "Well, it's too bad, I think they'll hang you for the murder."

"Murder? The knife mees the man both—"

Juan broke off abruptly, realizing that she had tricked him into betraying himself.

"How could you know the knives missed," Neva exclaimed triumphantly, "if you were home in bed?"

For a few seconds Juan stood silent. Then he matched cleverness with cleverness; he laughed. "You smart girl. Too smart by poor old Juan. I throw knives—sure. But Grayson, he pay me. Say he breeng you patio. I be hide. Then make knife mees. He be beeg hero for you then, no? Also, he want tell everybodys they try murder heem at McKeeny house."

Brad felt like rushing in and choking the lying scoundrel. Neva was convinced instantly; Juan made his fake confession sound most genuine. Brad went around front to gain the only door. But, turning the corner he spied two men approaching. McKinney limped along; Ramon Brandon with him. Brad had to duck back behind the corner. There was no point in tangling with them again, just now. Neva came out and slammed the door before she saw the two men.

"Find out anything?" McKinney asked her.

Evidently, he had known her intended visit to Juan's place.

"Yes," Neva snapped. "Grayson tried to make a sucker out of me—that's all."

She gave them Juan's explanation of the knife throwing. McKinney seemed satisfied to believe it. But Ramon vowed: "That Juan is too tricky. I'm going to order him out of the valley.

Father and daughter started back for the house. Ramon came into the house. Brad scurried back and lifted his ear close up to the broken window. Might pay to know what further trickery this pair was up to.

Another twenty dollars for you, hombre," Ramon offered praise of his hireling. "I told them I would order you off. You must go. Get your wagon loaded up and off by sunrise."

"But I am to help haul the stone tomorrow," Juan reminded.

"Never mind that. Alejandro will do it in your place. But I will want to send for you in a few days, when the Commission comes. And you will swear that Stone Number 16 has been on the ridge *west* of the Grayson homestead, ever since you can remember as a boy. And don't forget how old you are."

"Thirty-four."

"No, forty-one, *sabe?*"

"Si, Senior, forty-one. And weel sheriff ride tonight?"

"They have gone. But keep your mouth shut about that."

RAMON BEGAN to give his man further instructions. But just then the dog discovered Brad and set in to barking viciously. Ramon hushed instantly. Brad had to run; he could not afford to let Ramon know what he had overheard. For talk of Stone Number 16 and of the sheriff had set off a whole string of conjectures in his mind. Sheriff Baca was a second cousin of Ramon; that told just what little justice the homesteaders might expect at his hands.

Brad had to kick off the dog and try to run at the same time. Ramon and McKinney opened fire at him. They seemed desperately determined to get him, Brad knew they thought he had heard too much to be allowed to escape. He ducked down low, kicked at the dog, made for the cor-

ner of the nearest house. Somehow, he did not feel like firing back at Neva's father.

He gained the corner without being touched, rushed for the church, and found his horse gone. By now McKinney had half a dozen men close after him. Brad was compelled to hoof it for the nearest clump of bushes. Guns drove him along; every human being left in the town seemed to be shouting, screeching. The dogs came in a veritable pack, as though Brad had been some wild animal. And, to make matters far worse, Brad's first mounted pursuers came charging back.

Brad might have ducked along fences and brush, but for the dozen vicious dogs now at his heels. They seemed ready to rush in and tear him down. No hiding from them or shaking them off. Brad did the only thing left for him—rushed for a tiny, one-room Mexican hut that stood off by itself. But the place was occupied; he heard the door slammed shut as the dogs told of the disastrous approach. Bolted. Brad made a dive for the window, crashed through. A woman screamed. Brad hurled a straw-filled bedtick against the window, to keep out the dogs. In doing so, he spilled two small children onto the floor.

"Hay, hay, Madre de Dios!" the woman cried, crossing herself in fearful dread that the world was coming to an end.

Two bullets cracked through the window. The woman screamed loudly again. The children cried out in terror.

"Get out!" Brad told the woman in Spanish. To those outside he called, "Hold up out there till this woman gets her kids safe out."

A volley of lead was the answer. More guns poured lead through door and window. The woman was only a poor Mexican peon, but Brad would not subject her and the children to the perils of such a fierce fight. "All right," he yelled, "fetch yore sheriff here and I'll give up."

"You give up right now," Ramon hurled back.

That meant death, Brad knew it. Surrender to the sheriff might not be much better, but the officer at least would have to make a show of law. Especially since the congressional Commission was on its way here.

"I'm standin' yuh off, then," Brad told them, "till the sheriff comes." To the woman he said, "Yuh got to go. Take the kids and streak it." Out the window he shouted, "McKenney, yuh better mind how yuh kill a woman and babies, even with the Commission packed in yore favor. I'm puttin' them out now at yore mercy."

He had to do it. The woman, too terrified to disobey him, clutched the two children in her burly arms and ran out when he opened the door. To McKinney's credit, not a shot was fired until the woman and babies were safely out. Then they cut their lead loose with a vengeance. Brad still did not shoot back; he just saved his ammunition and waited. If they rushed door and window, some of them would pay dearly for it.

But they did not rush. The guns died down. The tight cordon was kept vigilant about the house. Brad held out till daylight, then Sheriff Baca came—a tiny man who carried two six-shooters and a knife. Brad surrendered.

Baca put handcuffs on him, loaded him onto a horse and said that he would take him to Pass Center, a larger town and the county seat. It lay through the low pass from this valley. Brad trusted himself to the officer only because McKinney would not dare let him be murdered in custody of the sheriff. Brad still held a little respect for McKinney's sense of justice; it was Ramon Brandon whom he had to fear most.

Chapter Three

THE JAIL was in ashes when the sheriff arrived with Brad. Little Hense Merrick one of the homesteaders lodged there during the night, had set fire to the place, forcing

the deputy sheriff in charge to evacuate all prisoners. For a temporary prison, they had commandeered a store building in process of construction. It was nothing but four 'dobe walls as yet, seven feet high. A guard sat up on top of each wall, shotgun in hand. A back door and the windows had been nailed up tight. Brad was pushed roughly through the front door. The padlock clicked behind him.

No wonder they needed a large prison space. Confined in there already were nine homesteaders and their entire families. Old women, young girls, boys of all ages. Boards were set up in a rear corner, from behind which came a suppressed groan. Disaster was revealed starkly in the grim faces of the homesteaders, in the fear-stricken faces of their women. Hope gone, gone their years of killing toil, whipped, cowed. Hense Merrick was chained to a heavy sill. Hense was a peculiarly fervid person; some said he was insane.

"What excuse did they make to arrest yuh?" Brad asked of an old man whom he had known in boyhood.

"No trouble talk there," a guard snapped from above.

The guard pointed his shotgun down at Brad. This guard was Drake Barsh, a huge, hump-shouldered man with a head like the end of a watermelon. A knife scar seemed to end in his right eye. That accounted for the filmy whiteness of the orb. "I wouldn't mind savin' the trouble of a trial for you," he taunted Brad. "A few skunks killed makes the stink less anyways."

Brad's blood boiled. So this was the McKinney brand of gunfighters. The low, cheap might of hirelings and their bosses pitted against a band of homesteaders who had been unable to organize into any unity of strength. Farmers, small "milk-pen" ranchers, day laborers seeking a home. They were bewildered, overwhelmed, awed by the sudden might of their enemies. One of them cursed under his breath as another groan came from the rear corner. That muttered oath suggested pent-up

fury, if it could only be released at the proper time. Children wailed; women wept silently; the faces of the men grew more sullen.

Shortly after Brad's incarceration, the door opened and three more families were driven into the open-air jail. Brad knew the story without asking. Ousted off their homesteads without trial. Arrested no doubt on the pretext of the court injunctions which McKinney had been getting out.

More homesteaders were brought in. The number grew to twenty-odd. With women and children, the prisoners totaled eighty-two. Then they brought in Brad's father. From up at the head of Sonrisa Valley. Old man Grayson had made a fight of it. His left arm was soaken darkly in blood; one of his eyes were swollen shut from a blow. His wounded arm had not been given medical attention, nor was any offered now.

It was Brad's turn to swear hard under his breath. For the sake of this gray-haired oldster, he had come back to fight McKinney and demand that the homesteaders get justice from the United States Government.

For a moment, father and son stood facing each other, silent, bitter, each hurt to see the other there. Each weighing the possibilities of danger to the other, if this fight went on. Each with rage in his heart. Then something passed between that father and son. Unspoken. Just a feeling. But as definite and real as if it had

been shouted out. They were not whipped; they would fight.

Just then the woman in the corner renewed her groans. An old woman came out, beckoned to the elder Grayson. He went on a trot to the place. It was his wife, Brad's stepmother. Grayson had been arrested one place, his younger wife another. In the course of time, he came to the grim, brooding Brad who sat with back hunched down against the clay wall. "You got a little half-sister," he announced.

The news stirred a strange feeling within Brad. This was a fine way for another Grayson to come into the world. A baby girl, who some day perhaps would tell her children where and how she was born. And it must be a proud story. That thought brought another unwelcome one leaping into Brad's head. What would Neva McKinney tell her children some day, of this hour? Her children —with Ramon Brandon as their father, perhaps. Brad shut out the thought.

More prisoners were pushed into the place. Bewildered, terrorized folks, rooted out of their homes. No place to go; no money. Cringing at the very mention of old Bob McKinney, new lord of their creation. Milling slowly back and forth. Dumb rage growing sullenly in their breasts. Brad was sickened at the sight of the poor devils. Hands gnarled, shoulders bent, bodies stiff. What if they were to try to fight? It might mean the penitentiary for all the men. Those who lived to be brought into court. But even that would be better than meek submission to this outrage.

Brad did not hold that McKinney might not have legal rights. He was perfectly willing to let an unbiased commission or court settle the question of whether or not the old Spanish land grant title would hold against homesteaders' claims. But he was going to fight to the last puff of powder against this high-handed method of dealing with the homesteaders before the U. S. Commission arrived.

THE FRONT door opened again. Two men came in, carrying a big galvanized can between them. Steam lifted from it. Behind them came Neva and Ramon, both horseback. A third man followed with a roundup coffeepot and a pitcher of milk. Neva and Ramon rode into the enclosure. She was dressed for the saddle: stetson, riding breeches.

Brad's anger swelled anew at sight of them and what they had. She would come like this, condescending to dispense charity to her father's victims. And with Brandon! Brad saw Brandon run his eyes over the silent, sullen prisoners. Brandon's eyes came to rest on Brad. The black orbs burned with satisfaction. Ramon was not so handsome just now, with a purple spot below his left eye and his lips swollen from their encounter with Brad's fist the night before.

"Perhaps," Neva was saying aloud to everybody, "you people would like a little soup and coffee. I'm having some chicken broth made for Mrs. Grayson."

Neva's voice was sympathetic, even tender, but it enraged Brad. He strode swiftly up to face Neva. She stiffened, sensing his hostility. Brad slapped a hand against the forty-gallon can, looked back at the mass of prisoners.

"Who wants Bob McKinney's charity?" he demanded.

His voice was deep, resonant. It seemed to carry some mysterious power. Pride. A fire. He would have been a leader in a college, Wall Street—anywhere. Every prisoner, even small children, watched him in awe. He knew what he was doing, knew of the dynamite in the hearts of these dispossessed people. He might be touching it off now.

"Not even these hungry kids here," he went on, "will want a drop of this pauper soup. I suggest, Miss McKinney, that we give it to your guest."

Brad heaved up the can, took it between his big hands and hurled the entire contents at Ramon. Don Ramon was almost drowned in the soup. His horse plunged from under him. Ramon scrambled to his feet,

with ludicrous spewing and wiping. But nobody laughed; the moment was too loaded with dynamite. Both guards atop the wall had their shotguns on Brad. Barsh was yelling for him to throw his hands up. Brad only gave the man a scornful glance. Then he faced Neva and entirely ignored the sputtering Ramon.

The girl's face had drained white, but her eyes were spitting fire. Her white upper teeth shut down onto lower lip, as if to bite off a torrent of words. She motioned violently at Barsh not to shoot. She was trying to control her rage; she might have done so, had not Brad laughed. Laughed derisively into her face. Challenging her and her father and her lover, Ramon Brandon to do their worst.

The girl's temper snapped. She rushed her horse at Brad, brought her quirt lash down across his back. Struck again, more viciously. Brad stood stock still and took it. Thought maybe he deserved it. The quirt came up the third time, swished hard onto the welting back.

"Pauper soup, huh?" Neva cried. "Well, take some McKinney fight soup, then—that! And that!"

She cut the fourth vicious blow across his shoulder. The mention of the name McKinney slithered something loose in Brad's chaotic brain. By that she was putting herself on equal footing with her marauding father. So be it; Brad leaped for her.

Ramon tried to block his way. Brad cracked him one under the chin so hard that the Irish-Spanish man's feet actually left the ground as he went hurtling backward. Ramon never moved after he hit the ground. Brad rushed on, caught Neva's quirt wrist, tore her from the saddle. Drake Barsh threw shotgun to cheek, but his fellow guard yelled not to endanger the girl by shooting. Brad, still unheeding the guards, lifted the girl into his arms and went striding toward the door with her. Neva kicked, writhed. She might as well have tried to tear out of a closed vise. She started to claw fingers into the flesh of his face. But she stopped the nails before they dug in. Too little a thing for her to do.

A frightened guard had been peering through a four-inch crack he kept open in the door. Now he slammed the door shut and tried to clamp on the padlock. But Brad hurled his shoulder against the door and knocked it wide open. Then he dumped Neva outside unceremoniously.

"This is a fight unbecomin' to you, girl," he told her. "Now stay out of it from here on—for she's gettin' mighty tough!"

"Stick them hands up, I said!" the door guard bellowed at Brad the second time.

BRAD JUST then realized that the man had a Winchester rifle in his face. He threw his hands up, as if in sudden surrender, turned his back on the guard, started back. Then all at once his father sent a short piece of 2x4 crashing through the door at the guard. Brad ducked, suddenly whirled back. The guard had been forced to duck, too, but too late. The 2x4 caught him a hard blow on the arm, before the man could recover his balance and get the rifle up with the partially numbed arm, Brad was upon him.

He tore the rifle out of the guard's hands, leaped back through the door. A gun from further out blazed at him just a fraction too slow. Brad whipped the rifle onto the nearest guard on the wall. The man leaped backward, to the outside, without pulling a trigger. But Barsh threw down on Brad. Brad's father was leaping in, to get between his son and Barsh and thus prevent Barsh from firing. But Barsh was in a hurry to get his man, the load of buckshot caught Brad's father in the back. He fell against Brad, slid to the earth.

Barsh, face snarling, was aiming at Brad, going to give him the other barrel. Brad fired first. Barsh went crashing backward. His body hit the ground outside like the fall of so much beef.

Now it was war! Brad had killed a man; they had slain his father. Tough gunslinger though Barsh was, the McKinney faction would make a martyr of him, would call on the

Government to outlaw such a killer as Brad. All this Brad foresaw. He meant to take the bull by the horns.

"Folks," he cried, "come on, let's take charge of things ourselves."

The homesteaders stood awed, terrified. Death had just claimed one of their finest neighbors. Sullen fury was raging in their hearts. A leader was all they needed. The men swarmed for the front door. Brad led the way through it, leaped into the open, fired at the first man who tried to trigger on him from the corner of the next building. It was a veritable mob at Brad's back now. They sent yells of defiance ringing through the town. Challenge.

Chapter Four

Homesteaders rushed to get the dead Barsh's sixshooter and shotgun. Others poured down the street, for a hardware store, Brad still leading them. They passed Neva. She refused to get out of their way—just stood stolidly, looking at Brad in a queer sort of way, perhaps with some fear. They divided past her, rushed on. Left her standing alone.

What few McKinney men were out rushed to cover. This thing was like a volcano suddenly erupted; there was no stopping it, not with what McKinney power there was at hand. Many of McKinney's henchmen were strangely missing. The mob rushed into the store, took every gun and every cartridge in the place.

"Wait fellers." Brad called. "Let the clerk charge each gun to the man that's got it. We'll pay for 'em later; else, they'll be tellin' Uncle Sam we're a bunch of looters."

Some of the homesteaders were impatient. Brad had to collar one to prevent his shooting out the window at a McKinney man. They moved back into the street, with little clamor. Just grim men. Neva had galloped a horse off for the sheriff's temporary office. Brad headed his mob that way. To his surprise, neutral citizens began to join his force. Sympathy ran almost entirely to the ousted homesteaders. McKinney was new in the country; Ramon Brandon never had been liked.

Brad halted in front of the sheriff's office. Sheriff Baca came out, flanked by Neva and her limping father. Two deputies followed. Something less than a dozen men remained in Baca's office. There McKinney hirelings. And a few friends of Don Ramon.

For about thirty seconds Brad faced his enemies, silent. The men behind him silent. Forty-odd now, hearts raging to get at McKinney. Little Hense Merrick broke the silence, to curse McKinney and Baca and start a jabbering abuse of them. Brad seized him by the shoulder, thrust him back.

"I'll take care of this," Brad said. "McKinney, make up yore mind whether yuh're willin' to pay the price to stop us, or settle that boundary dispute square. The homesteaders know that yore land grant line calls for a straight shot from a split rock on Indian Ridge across the valley to a big rock on Cowhide Ridge, that's got the number 16 chiseled on it. All the homesteaders ask is that you stay on the east side of that line. They stay on—"

"But my house and all my tenant houses are on the west side," McKinney protested. "Besides, Ramon says the correct line runs seventeen miles west of where the homesteaders claim it does."

"And," Brad changed both argument and tone, "one of yore gun-

slingers has just cut down my father back there with buckshot."

"Is that a bluff?" McKinney growled. "If so, Grayson, you better be mighty damn ready to back it up. Barsh was sworn in as a deputy. You yourself killed him; that makes you an outlaw, Grayson."

"I'd already figured on that."

"Well, figure on this, Sheriff Baca, arrest Grayson."

Baca hesitated. Courage was not one of his qualifications for office.

"Call out your men," McKinney insisted. "They're all duly sworn deputies."

"To mock the law!" Brad cried. "Just try to use that sort of law to lock me up."

McKinney turned his head inside. "Come on, men," he ordered.

Eleven men came out, lined up with him. It was showdown time. Law against Brad's mob. Brad was forced to admire McKinney's courage against odds of four to one; somehow, McKinney impresed him as a hard man, but more or less with a sense of right in his makeup. A murmur arose behind Brad. The mob didn't like this show of force from McKinney. "McKinney," somebody shouted, "you're fixin' to get yourself strung up!"

That betrayed the true temper of the mob. Brad hated to think of its fury breaking against McKinney. But a sudden, unexpected thing broke like an explosion. Little Hense Merrick went darting out in front of Brad. Merrick yelled at McKinney. "You cain't browbeat us any longer, you range hog!"

With that, the frenzied Merrick jerked up his gun with the abandon of a zealot. He fired at McKinney. McKinney grabbed hard for hardware. A bullet hit him as he did so. He fell to one knee, caught himself. Fired back. Brad leaped out, to stop Merrick's mad attack. He was too late. McKinney's bullet tore through Merrick's body; the little crazed man fell backward, dying. McKinney also was on the ground.

"For Gawd's sake, hold it!" Brad cried at his followers.

GUNS ALREADY were being drawn, on both sides. Brad ran along in front of his men, holding up his hands. Neva was in front of the most belligerent of her father's hirelings. When she was sure they would not invite disaster by opening fire, she came stepping out to meet Brad, face as white as death. But eyes afire with something that made Brad half—afraid of what, though, he could not tell. Both hate and fury were in those flashing black eyes. And something more. Brad feared it was utter condemnation of him. How strangely fate had thrust itself in between them. So long gone that moment he had held her in his arms in the patio, when she almost surrendered to his love. Now his father slain by her faction; her father dying there on the ground.

"Go ahead, keep up your killings," she invited, voice low and tense. "Run your mob roughshod over this country; I suppose you'll start in to do that, now that I'm left as sole owner of the Cross Nine."

Her taunting words and tone stung Brad to the very quick. Make him out not only an outlaw desperado, but a woman fighter. It was unfair.

"But don't forget," she added, "that the U. S. cavalry is stationed at Fort Bliss. At least they're not left with a woman commander."

Invoke the aid of the army to support high-handed stuff like this! It made Brad see red. Her second taunt about his fighting a woman was too much. "I've heard," he snapped out, before considering what he was saying, "that you and Don Ramon were fixin' to get married. Why don't yuh go ahead and hitch up to 'im. Then I'll have a man to fight—as boss of the Cross Nine. A man in size, anyhow."

"And he's a man in all other respects," Neva flung back.

She stopped abruptly, as if the idea had struck a strange chord in her breast. For about ten dreadful seconds she looked into Brad's eyes. He knew now he had made her hate him as she had never hated any human being before; he was burning all

bridges behind him. Neva turned to Baca with a decision that made Brad start to tremble. He tried to cast off the momentary weakness.

"Go round up Ramon," she instructed the sheriff, "and tell him to get Squire Langworth and meet me over there on the courthouse steps."

She whirled back on Brad. "Would you and your mob," she invited, "like to come along to my wedding?"

Brad cursed savagely within himself. This was what his temper had done—prodded her into marrying that polecat, whether she wanted him or not. He did not believe she did. Else, why had she yielded to Brad's embrace last night in the patio, for a few seconds anyway? Now she was striding toward the courthouse steps. It was too late, though, Brad told himself, to try to change her mind.

"Folks," Brad said to his homesteaders, "get yoreselves horses and wagons. We're goin' back to Sonrisa Valley—to fight. But keep together. And yuh all better camp at Pete Ward's farm. It's on the deadline for the Cross Nine outfit, and we don't mean to have 'em pass that deadline, either."

BRAD WENT to arrange for the care of his father's body, then secured a horse to ride. But he kept glancing up the street at the courthouse. There went Don Ramon and the justice of the peace. Neva met them on the courthouse steps. Handed the squire a piece of paper. A license to marry, of course. Ramon took her hand. The squire began to intone the words of the ceremony in a loud voice. It was a terrible moment for Brad, plain hell; he remembered the feel of that proud, courageous girl in his arms. The maddening sweetness of her lips. Now he had driven her to this Ramon's arms—forever! Sweat stood out on Brad's brow.

Brad could stand it no longer. A wild scheme struck him. He ran over to where a homesteader was just fastening the last tug of a buckboard. Brad leaped into the buckboard, seized the reins. Lashed the team toward the courthouse steps. Pulled up. Neva glanced at him. The squire halted, peered over his glasses, half in dread. Ramon put his hand onto a gun handle, eyed Brad.

Brad leaped out of the buckboard, walked up to Ramon, held out his hand, said, "Gimme that gun, hombre."

His voice was too quiet. Too desperate. Ramon stammered, "Well, I don't want to cause any more trouble," and handed over the gun. Brad took it, looked at Neva. She seemed to half guess his intent; her hand darted into the bosom of her boyish blue-and-gray flannel shirt, brought a .32 Smith & Wesson leaping out. "I've changed my mind about the invitation," she anncunced. "You better stay away."

Her voice was oddly low, but desperate. Brad only laughed. Suddenly he leaped toward her, ignored the gun, crushed her into his arms. Swung her off her feet, carrying her to the buckboard.

Behind him, Ramon blustered, "You'll never get away with a thing like that, Grayson. In the name of all law and decency, I order you to put my wife down!"

Brad kept going. But he glanced down at Neva's face sharply and asked, "Had yuh said yes—finished that ceremony plumb entire?"

"No," she answered. Then, as if regretting telling the truth, she added, "But it was as good as over; it makes not the slightest difference to you anyway, cowboy."

"Oh, yes it does," he told her, and his smile was that of a man who knew there was no turning back from a mad undertaking.

HE LIFTED her into the buckboard. She still had not made the least effort to break away from him. He knew she was trying to bluff him with the attitude that such a thing as this was unthinkable. He put her on the seat, sat down beside her. Don Ramon stood stock still, horrified. He did love this girl; it was terrible to have her snatched away from him like this at just a minute before the twelfth hour, so to speak.

"Don Ramon," Brad laughed mock-

ingly, "last night you slipped up in the shadows and watched me kiss her. Now I'll give yuh another free look—at a bride gettin' kissed!"

He threw his arms about Neva, crushed her to him. Pressed lips down hard onto hers. She never moved. Just looked up at him with a look that stilled the mad beating of his outlaw heart. She wasn't even giving him half a kiss this time. She just let him take her lips. Cold, unreal. He turned her loose and lashed up the team. The buckboard rattled down the dusty street. Everybody was watching. And everywhere heads shook gravely.

Brad was amazed at the girl's coolness. Even when they clattered out of town, she made no effort to get out or to stop the horses. Brad knew she meant to make him abandon his scheme, out of fear. Or shame. "Has Ramon been in charge of the Cross Nine," he asked her, "ever since yore dad bought it?"

"What difference does it make?" she countered.

"Heaps of difference, girl. I'm goin' to show yuh a lot of crooked work goin' on. I jest would sorter like to think that yore dad ain't guilty of plannin' it all. That's all."

"Show me the dirty work first," she challenged.

"Will yuh stay with me till I do?"

"Yes—long enough for you to make good that boast, anyway."

"I'm not boastin', girl; I'm hopin' to make it possible for you, all through life, to still think well of yore daddy."

She looked straight ahead and made no reply. But he had the vague feeling somehow that she had been moved by his words.

Chapter Five

FROM A high place, five miles out of town, Brad looked back and saw a long line of vehicles and horses moving out of town. The valley settlers were coming back, this time, with guns

in their hands. Brad whacked the team on through the low pass, down into Sonrisa.

The bawl of cattle came to their ears. They overtook a big herd. Every brute in it had the McKinney road brand on it. The three thousand cattle were meant to overrun small ranches, farms. Meant to tear down fences, eat gardens and field crops.

Again Brad asked, "Did yore dad plan this—and all the rest?"

He nodded at the herd. Cowboys were staring at him and Neva. Hard stares. Puzzled ones, too. For Neva apparently was riding with him as a willing passenger.

"Papa has been laid up since a horse fell on him the day we got here, and so he gave Ramon a rather free hand," she admitted.

Ramon Brandon, then, was the man who had actually instituted all the deviltry against the homesteaders. Brad wanted it that way; he swung the buckboard around the herd. Stopped to confront the man in charge. Dish-faced Lash Bowyer. Huge, bull-built.

"There's a dirt water tank half a mile down the road," Brad told him without mincing words. "Yuh can go on there and water up. But don't take this herd past there."

Bowyer was a tough hombre. He sneered at Brad, without answering. Rolled a big cud of tobacco deep into his jaw. Then he called an unhurried, "Hey, boys!" to his riders, and waved them to him. The cattle drifted while the men came galloping from all directions. Brad handed Neva the reins and stepped out of the buckboard. The men crowded up. Brad backed away a little, to keep all of them in front of him.

"This gunslinger," Bowyer told his men, a disdainful leer on his face, "tells me to halt the herd down at the next tank. Miss Neva, you got anything to say on that?"

"Not a word," the girl replied.

"Then, Grayson," Bowyer lit into him, "you listen to me. The herd waters, then moves on; if you don't like that program, yuh can wait down there at the tank and take us on. Or —fight right here."

Bowyer laughed mockingly, showing dirty yellow teeth and two prominent tusks. Then he puckered thick lips and squirted tobacco juice straight and copiously onto Brad's left boot. It was like a slap in the face. Brad never looked down, he felt the stuff strike; with the spitting, Bowyer let his hand come to rest on his gun handle. Eight men backing him were ready to draw, too. Brad flushed, then went pale. He thought it was his time to die; they could get him. But he was not going to take the insult.

"Bowyer," he said, voice tense with full realization of his peril, "you get down and wipe off that ambeer."

Bowyer threw back his head and laughed. Then he puckered his lips for a second shot at the boots. Brad knew the big bully was deliberately tempting him into a draw. And in that instant he realized something else, too; Bowyer was not such a brave man, after all. He didn't intend to get Brad. Instead, off at the end, he had a killer waiting for Brad's first break—a little man with one eye like milk, the other a glassy hazel color. That was Luke Greb, paid killer. Fast on the draw, always willing. Brad didn't care; he couldn't back down. He meant to get Greb first, then Bowyer.

"Come on, wipe it off," he ordered Bowyer, "or I'm goin' to kill you."

His voice carried deadly earnestness. Not a man there could doubt that he was going to back his words with gunsmoke. The leering grin suddenly left Bowyer's face. He knew he was near death. Greb might not get this Grayson killed before the foolhardy ranny put a bullet into him. Greb was the only man who never changed expression; his hand was lying on his thigh, close to his gun handle. He didn't know that Brad Grayson had him singled out for enemy number 1. There was a silent interval of a few seconds. Only the bare squeak of saddle leather as a man shifted his right hip a little handier. A dreadful silence.

"Bowyer, get down and do what Grayson says!"

IT WAS Neva's abrupt command. It broke so sharply and unexpectedly that Bowyer threw his gun hand upward, showing he had intended doing that if Brad went for his gun. Greb would be doing the killing. Neva was standing up in the buckboard, finger pointing down at the soiled boots imperiously. Lovely girl. Young face flushed. Black eyes flaming. Queenly. Dazzlingly beautiful. Yet a fighter.

"You can't mean it, Miss Neva," Bowyer protested. "If yore dad gits whupped on this fight, it'll be Grayson that does it."

"My father is dead," Neva answered, a slight catch in her throat.

"Dead?"

"Yes. I'm boss of this outfit; you clean off that boot."

"I'll quit first," Bowyer vowed. "No woman is goin' to order me around."

"You can't quit till you clean that boot," Neva vowed; "then you're fired."

Bowyer eyed her hatefully; this was wholly unlooked for. With a muttered oath, he started to turn away. But he suddenly froze. Brad's gun had come leaping out. Even Greb had been taken by surprise at the

electric-swift draw. Bowyer went pale. He was no man to invite sudden death. "I apologize, Grayson," he muttered.

Brad made no reply. Actual terror began to spread into Bowyer's eyes.

"Ain't that enough?" he demanded.

"No, clean that boot."

Another strained silence. Greb's one eye was afire, dully, but calculating, too. And he somehow had sensed the fact that Brad had him marked to die first, in a general free-all blazing of guns.

"Clean it, Bowyer," said Greb, to the amazement of all.

"Well, I'll do it—but only to save that girl gittin' hurt."

Bowyer got down sullenly, pulled off his blue bandanna neckerchief. Smeared at the boot, tossed the neckerchief over onto a cholla cactus. Brad never looked to see what sort of job had been done. Greb was waiting for him to look down at the boots; that was why Greb had joined in ordering Bowyer to the hateful task.

"Forty men are comin' back there," Brad told the bunch. "All heeled, too. They'll take care of every rider that has a part in drivin' this herd past the dirt tank. Now ride."

"You go straight to the ranch and get your warbag, Bowyer," Neva ordered. "I'll meet you there and pay you off. Greb, you take charge of the cattle."

"And head back the other way?" Greb wanted to know.

"Certainly not. Push them right on down into the Valley."

She cast Brad a defiant look as she gave the contradictory order. Now he knew that she had interfered only to prevent his being slaughtered; she was conceding no change of heart toward the homesteaders.

Brad drove on. At Pueblito he turned the tired team over to a Mexican boy.

"Go the rest of the way horseback with me?" he asked Neva.

"Yes."

That was all they said. Brad saddled fresh horses. It was three o'clock. Darkness would not fall until eight. They could cover a good deal of ground in five hours. He held northwest for fifteen miles, two hours. Then they struck fresh wagon tracks. That was what he had been looking for. The tracks cut deep into the trailless earth. Many horses had been pulling the wagon. Without a word to Neva, Brad began following the wagon. She refused to ask why.

The sun sank to the western horizon. A great fan of gold spread into the sky. Bushy-headed yuccas near the two riders silhouetted against the gold. The eastern sky was pink, old gold. Purple low down where junipers and cholla cactus thrust up into it from ridge tops. A dog howled mournfully off at a homesteader's cabin, lonesome for his people driven out. Brad halted, so Neva could hear that plaintive protest against her policy. Then he swept a hand off at the wide, peaceful expanse of valley.

"Old Sonrisa is peaceful," he said. "The critters in it ain't—that's the whole trouble."

He looked full into her eyes and smiled. Warmly, as a friend. Her long eyelashes fell. He thought it was to hide a flash of shame that he had startled into expression there. He rode on; she did not say a word.

THE WAGON trail cut up over Cowhide Ridge, then skirted westward along the rolling north side of the ridge.

"They left the valley before daylight," Brad told her. "Witnesses weren't wanted for this kind of work."

"Just what are you getting at, anyway?" she wanted to know.

"Well," Brad told her, "about a month ago, I understand, what is known as Stone Number 16 disappeared from the crest of this Cowhide Ridge. It had stood back yonder east of us plenty far to make Pueblito and all improvements fall outside the land grant. Now it's being moved up Cowhide ridge, to take in all of Sonrisa valley. There are two split rocks on Indian Ridge, on the south side of the valley yonder. To choose the westernmost one and then move Stone Number 16 fifteen or

eighteen miles west would take in every homestead on the Sonrisa, includin' my dad's. They're aimin' to convince the dude Commission that this is the true line."

It was a daring trick, and a stupendous one. To shift markers as Brad had outlined would take into the grant a section of country about twenty-three miles long, north and south. Its southern boundary would be extended ten miles. Its northern width whatever distance Stone Number 16 was moved. Already Brad and Neva were nearly a dozen miles from the original resting place of the large boulder on which the number 16 had been chiseled. This stone was called for in the rather loose description which the original deed gave of the grant made when New Mexico was only a Spanish province.

"And," Neva asked earnestly, "you think my father deliberately set out to cheat all these people like that?"

"No, not your father; but Ramon sold him the grant on terms you don't know about. Ramon claimed that the grant took in all of Sonrisa Valley, and he was to get an extra sixty thousand dollars if he could make the claim stick."

Neva rode along in silence for half a mile. Brad could feel that she was fighting a terrific battle within herself. Proud. Altogether a princess of the saddle. But, also, very sincere and honest.

"Brad," she finally vowed, "I want you to prove what you claim. I want it, understand."

She halted her horse on the ridge top. The first touch of dusk was settling over the valley. Gorgeous in the deep purples that were fading into darker hues. Home of hard-working, callous-handed men and women—people not to be robbed if they had a just claim. She seemed to tell Brad all that, without making the admission in so many words, told him by just looking off over the disputed range. While their horses panted side by side. Something mighty and overpowering swept through Brad's breast. His heart beat with tumultuous joy. She knew good. Fine. Incorruptible. He knew it, now. That conviction brought another gripping one, until a sort of outlaw ecstasy seized upon him. She was his woman. He was going to fight through hell to take her. No thought that she was beyond him because she was rich and had a good education. Just man and woman, making their own destiny.

He couldn't talk just then. Couldn't even answer her. He touched spurs lightly to his horse's ribs. Headed onto the wagon tracks again. They rode with no other sound save that of shod hoofs in the deep gramma grass and the creak of their saddles.

Then came the cluck-cluck of a wagon ahead. Both quickened their pace. But the wagon was coming toward them. The team loomed ahead of them. Only two horses. Brad was disappointed. The wagon was empty, on the return. The other draft animals had been taken back some other way. Only one man was with the wagon. Brad halted him.

"Well, did you get Number 16 set up good and natural?" he demanded.

Brad spoke angrily, almost sarcastically. But the dull-witted Mexican entrusted with the team did not catch his antagonism. He rcognized Neva, and did not know who Brad was. He must have concluded that Brad was only another impatient foreman.

"Juan Bueno feex rock up good," he assured Brad. "They camp tonight; feex all good manana."

Brad was quick to take advantage of the man's misunderstanding. "Did Juan think he could make it look natural?"

"He deed."

"And," Brad next demanded, "will you be ready to swear, hombre, that Stone Number 16 has been up in this new spot all your life?"

"Yes, I promise Senor Ramon."

"Fine," Brad praised. "But we have changed our minds. Turn your team around. We are going to move the rock back; the law might catch us at this trick."

The Mexican, puzzled but without suspicion, turned his wagon around and started back.

"Tell the boys," Brad instructed, "to load the stone back on first thing in the mornin'. Senorita McKinney will be there at daylight to tell them it is all right. Won't you, ma'am?"

Brad made the appeal to Neva as though it were a simple request. But in reality he was asking her to change over to his side of this bitter fight, to renounce all her father's former claims. In effect, to publicly admit McKinney wrongdoing. He relied solely on her sense of honesty and justice.

She sat her horse motionless, without a word. He knew what chaos was in her heart. Waited patiently for her to struggle through to some decision. She took so long that even the droopy-eyed teamster showed puzzlement at her indecision.

It was a full minute before she finally said, "Yes, I'll go camp with our men and see that Stone Number 16 is started back—provided I think such action the proper thing to do."

It took rare courage for her to make that promise. She actually meant that she would investigate for herself, in company with men who would suppose that she was aware of the stone's removal if such a thing had been done. And, if it had been moved, she was virtually promising to come over to Brad's side.

"Yuh're shore a plumb real girl," he vowed fervently. "Really, we got nothing to fight each other for, from here on. I'm goin' back, though, to see that them cows don't come on in to overrun all the crops and such."

As abruptly as that, he entrusted to her the mission of returning Stone Number 16 to its rightful location. She could do more than he could with a dozen men, he felt at that moment. He rode down into the darkness of the valley. Silent, watchful, mind busy. But with tumultuous joy beginning to sing in his heart.

Chapter Six

BRAD found only Pete Ward and his two boys at the Ward homestead.

"Why didn't the rest meet here?" Brad asked Ward.

"They did. But they're gone now to turn back that herd; you done got 'em ready to fight a field of wildcats, Brad."

Good news, in one respect; bad in another. Brad thought they could get along now without bloodshed. Blood certainly would be spilled if the homesteaders clashed with the cowboys driving in the Cross Nine herd. Neva could stop it; if she wouldn't Brad wanted to be in on the clash.

"Hey, Bud," Brad instructed Ward's son, "you high-tail it to Long-Bone Creek, take to Cowhide Ridge from there and yuh'll cut wagon tracks about daylight. Follow 'em west, till yuh find Neva McKinney. Tell 'er to streak it for the incomin' herd, provided she's convinced said cattle hadn't oughta come in."

Brad himself rode southeastward across the valley. Soon the glare of a camp fire directed him. Cross Nine camp. Brad scouted around. Found the band of homesteaders. They were waiting for daybreak to attack. Brad had difficulty in making them believe that a bloody attack was not necessary to turn back the invading cattle.

"It'll put us in bad with the U.S. Commission when it gets here," he told them. "Besides, Neva is on our side now."

"That don't sound right," declared John Johns, gnarled-handed homesteader.

"Anyway," Brad vowed again, "right now she's fixin' to fetch Stone Number 16 back for us."

"I got to see it first," the begrizzled Johns held out. "Brad Grayson, I ain't forgot the time fifteen years ago you dropped a lighted firecracker in my hip pocket jist as I was steppin' acrost a salty bronc."

"I'm makin' up for that now," Brad grinned.

"Yuh're makin' up to Neva McKinney, ef I see straight," Johns retorted. "Fellers, let's jump this cowboy outfit and pay no attention to Grayson."

"Folks," Brad pleaded. "Jest wait for a spell. It won't hurt to give Neva a chance to prove what I claim."

"That's the way I'm a-thinkin'," a homesteader agreed.

The tide turned in Brad's favor; the attack put off. Day dawned. The homesteaders sneaked back to their horses. The McKinney camp stirred. Cattle began to bawl. Moved. A mile. Two. Three. Cross Nine riders seemed scarce. Only six of them for three thousand cattle. Homesteaders swore impatiently. Neva McKinney was overdue. Brad was not so sure of her support. John Johns led the homesteaders around to another ridge top. From there they had to watch the herd come to the first field of corn. The McKinney outfit saw them, shouted derisive remarks at them. Brad thought it queer that so few in number would deliberately invite an attack. A cowboy cut the wire. The cattle invaded the corn. Licked in the dwarfed crop as if it had been only a morsel. The owner swore savagely. Then started for the cowboys.

With a roar, old John Johns called upon all the rest to follow. Control passed out of Brad's hands. The homesteaders, secure in the belief that their thirty-odd could whip the half dozen cowboys, were somewhat eager to tie into them. Brad raced up to a high point, searched the rolling country beyond vainly for sight of Neva.

Guns began to crack. Brad saw a cowboy fall from the saddle. That seemed the signal for a tornado of guns to break loose. Cross Nine cowboys came pouring down from the pinon brush beyond the cattle. Brad counted them. Twenty-eight. They charged hard and recklessly for the homesteaders. Yelled hideously. Fired as they rode, like wild devils. Ramon Brandon was leading them.

The poor homesteaders, unused to fighting, were taken with sudden panic. They had not looked for any hidden force like this. They broke and fled like sheep. The cowboy rough riders chased them pell-mell into the brush. Shrieked derisive jeers at them.

It was a dejected, shame-faced bunch of men who finally got together again two miles from the scene of their humiliation. A few never did show up. Not a man had been hurt. Old John Johns was man enough to step up to Brad, hand thrust out.

"Cowboy, you take charge," he begged. "I'm a plain hoe-man not a general, I reckon."

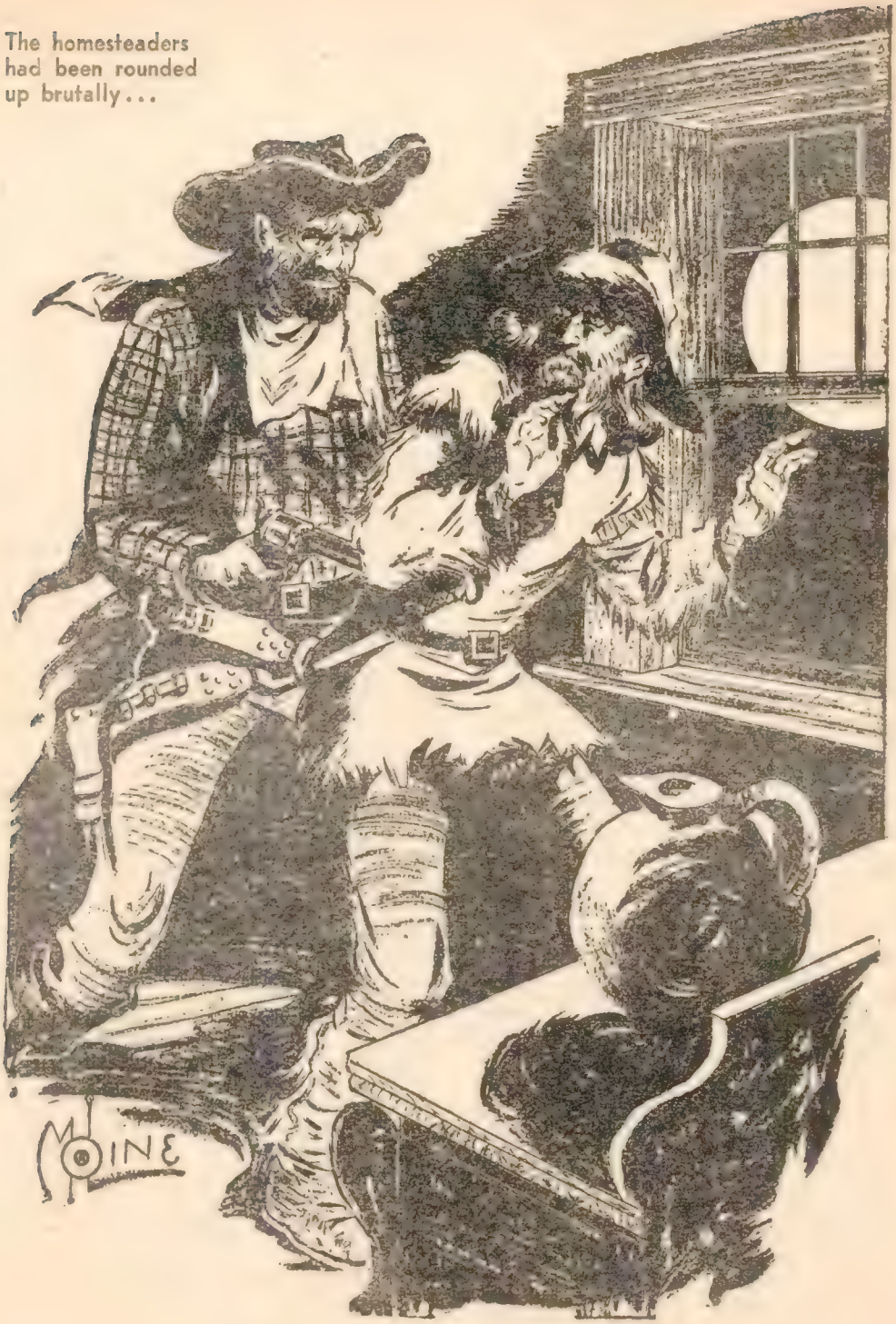
BRAD ACCEPTED the apology with the same sportsmanship with which it was given. "Neva's been held up some way," he told the excited homesteaders. "Let's forget about the cattle, and go make certain that Stone Number 16 is taken back where it belongs. That's heaps more important than savin' a few acres of corn and beans, anyway."

It was fortunate that they had such an excellent task to turn to. Brad infused into the men new courage. Now that they knew what to expect, they would be more likely to withstand the shock of a second charge by Don Ramon's riders.

"Pretend to scatter for yore homes, fellers," Brad instructed. "Then meet me back of Little Sugar-Loaf Peak yonder."

In due time, Brad was pleased to get together twenty-six men at the appointed spot. When it was apparent that two more had deserted the cause, he headed his subdued band up Sonrisa Valley.

They met Neva on the way, and the wagon with Stone Number 16 on it! At sight of Brad's approaching



The homesteaders had been rounded up brutally...

band, the three men with Neva hurled excited exclamations back and forth. One started to run. The girl blocked him with the dappled gray horse she was riding.

"We had a hard time loading it," she explained to Brad, "because some of the men got called away in the night."

"Didn't the Ward boy bring you any word from me?" Brad asked.

"No."

"Then he must've been captured by the men leavin' the wagon camp. Ramon is pushin' in his herd, with three dozen gunslingers. Looks like we're goin' to have to tie into 'em heavy."

Brad had a double purpose in his last observation. The very manner in which he said it was calculated to lend courage to his men. Then, it left the way open for Neva to stop her invaders if she chose to.

"I'll ride ahead and see about it," she assured them.

The girl rode on alone. Brad stayed with his men. He didn't want them to lose their regained spirit. Many of them still refused to believe Neva honest in her switch to their side. It was just unnatural, they claimed; some cunning trick.

The three McKinney wagon hands were made little less than prisoners, though permitted to remain in charge of the eight-horse team that kept the big freight wagon rolling down the valley road. Brad pushed out in advance of wagon and homesteaders.

He had gone less than a mile when he noticed a raven circling above a spot over the ridge on his left. The black bird kept repeating his low, easy "Clouck, clouck, clouck." That and the way it returned over the same spot told Brad that the bird might be calling attention to some intruder on the ground. Just then a jackrabbit came tearing over the ridge toward Brad. That made Brad decide it was worth while to investigate. He headed to the ridge crest.

And came almost flush onto Don Ramon and thirty men! They were afoot at the moment, hurrying for the very ridge on which Brad's horse stood. Brad had just barely averted a disastrous ambush. It would have been that this time, with that Stone Number 16 as the prize. Evidently, Ramon had avoided Neva somehow.

Brad resorted instantly to quick-witted strategy. He held his hand down as if for a quieting signal, and called loud enough for Ramon to hear, "Wait, boys; don't shoot unless they ask for it." He was feigning well a pretense to having all his men in readiness on the ridge.

Ramon pulled up. Took his men scutting back over the next ridge. That gave Brad a chance to gallop back to his homesteaders. But further progress with the wagon was impossible. Ramon was circling around.

"Fellers," Brad told his dubious force, "they'll aim to stampede us again. Make up yore minds right now to fight. Or we better run. Which is it?"

"Fight!" Johns bellowed.

"Then swing the wagon onto that high ground acrost the bottom there. They'll have a time takin' it from us."

From a ridge point, Brad saw Don Ramon place his men on each side of the canyon, lower down. The wagon had to go down the canyon. Ramon's force could be dislodged only at the cost of many lives. Ramon would have all the advantage in such a fight. If Brad should not attempt to fight through with the wagon, all Ramon need do was wait. It would look bad for the Commission to come and find the homesteaders moving the stone.

"Brad," John Johns vowed, "we got to take that stone back, come all hell and high water. But we're leavin' the leadership to you."

The homesteaders indeed were desperate. If Stone Number 16 were not definitely located in its rightful place, every homestead in the Valley would be lost.

AT THIS point, Neva came galloping back. She rode up to Ramon. Brad could see her talking angrily to him and the Cross Nine

men. Their voices lifted, Brad shifted nearer, heard Neva vow, "I'm boss here; I say that stone goes back, and this bunch of cutthroats goes off my payroll."

"You forget," Don Ramon retorted, "that you're my wife. That makes me boss, not you."

Ramon was resorting to the custom brought through Mexico from Spain, by which the husband was master of his wife and all she owned.

"That ceremony was never entirely finished," Neva cried. "And, even if it had been, you'd still lack a lot of being boss here. Get off this range—and stay off forever!"

She jerked up the doubled end of a rope, charged at Ramon, lashed the rope down across his back. Brad knew by experience how angry that girl could get when she took to lashing a man. Ramon dodged back among his henchmen. One of them seized Neva's horse. Then others. She laid about her with the rope. But they tore her from the saddle, began tying her arms behind her back.

"Come on, fellers," Brad cried, "we're a-going' to stop that!"

The homesteaders started a grim line for the invaders. Ramon took a quick survey, then shoved the thonged Neva out and, with a rope, lashed her to a juniper snag on the ridge crest. Just in front of her was an extended comb of rock cropping out. Ramon placed half of his men behind the rock comb. To shoot at them at all would endanger the girl, for bullets might ricochet off toward her from almost any angle.

"Now," Ramon yelled tauntingly, "come on, make your charge."

Brad halted his advance. Ramon invited him on, taunted him. It seemed as though Ramon wanted Brad's force to kill the girl in the attack. It would have served a double purpose. Ramon, with love quickly turned to savage hate of Neva, wanted her to be slain. That would leave him sole owner of the McKinney wealth. Besides, if the homesteaders should kill the girl, it would mean their utter condemnation in the eyes of the Commission.

Johns said, "Brad, we better think twice." The homesteaders were fully aware of their grave predicament. Brad drew them back.

"Look, there's old McKinney himself!" somebody cried.

Rancher McKinney indeed it was; head in a bandage. He was tied in his saddle as a precaution against a swoon as he rode. McKinney had revived from Merrick's bullets, but he still was not beyond death's clutches. By riding over the ridge as he did, he was much nearer to Brad's men than Ramon's. But he seemed to mistake them for his own men. Brad thought McKinney's eyes were almost unseeing, so nearly gone was he.

"There's our chance, boys," Johns cried. "We'll ketch him and hang 'im offen he don't order his men off."

"Wait a minute, boys," Brad urged. "McKinney is in a bad fix. He can't stand no chorusin' around."

"He can stand it as good as our women and kids can," Johns retorted. "Let's git 'im, men."

They did go out to get him, spreading out in a half circle. McKinney kept riding for them. It was evident now that he was nearly blind. Ramon watched them without protest and with not the least effort to regain possession of McKinney himself. Brad realized that Ramon wanted McKinney to be harassed until death was certain to claim him. Ramon's avowal about being boss showed that he did not want McKinney nor any other man to stand between him and the McKinney fortune.

Johns lifted McKinney from his horse. The rancher was too near gone to struggle after he discovered that he was in the hands of enemies and not friends.

"Now, Ramon," Johns shouted, "you stand back and let us take that stone on, or we'll stretch old McKinney up."

"What's all this? What's goin' on?" McKinney asked weakly.

Brad put the rancher gently on the ground, and started to explain.

Bud was shoved in with the others.

But McKinney fainted away.

"Well," Johns yelled at Ramon, "what's the answer?"

"You wouldn't dare hang him," Ramon simulated displeasure at the threat.

"Won't we?" Johns roared. "Miss McKinney, you better take matters into hand three, or yore dad swings, shore as shootin'."

Johns meant it. Brad knew well enough that Ramon Brandon was the man chiefly responsible for the harsh treatment of the homesteaders. He tried to tell them so. But Johns demanded: "I claim old McKinney had to know what was goin' on, every detail. He stood to gain most by it, didn't he? Effen we do string 'im up, it'll be his just deserts."

The homesteaders' passions had been stirred so deeply by what they considered oppression and robbery, that sane reason entirely deserted them. They had in their possession here and now the man whose money and power had been riding over them in all the ruthless might of the old-time cow king. McKinney was that type, no matter what else might have been said in his favor.

"If," Johns put the homesteader case well, "we got to lose out, we might as well have the satisfaction of knowin' McKinney will never live to enjoy his victory."

ROUGH, oath-laden approvals came from all sides. The homesteaders became more like wolves ready to tear to pieces the unfortunate dog overtaken in the chase. Brad sympathized with them in their fury. But this man was Neva's father; that was all that counted with him just then. The rancher's high-handedness was not so much one individual's sins as it was of a past custom of cattle barons. Brad tried to tell the homesteaders this; they scoffed aside his words, and began looking for a suitable limb.

"Hey, there," Ramon was shouting, "if you hang McKinney, it'll break my little wife's heart."

Fake protest. Ramon could not have offered any weaker argument against the lynching. The home-

steaders did not share at all Brad's conviction that Neva was wholly sincere in her change of heart. They remembered how bitterly she had opposed them. Many had distrusted her seeming opposition to Ramon.

"Boys," Brad pleaded, "yuh'll ruin the last chance in the world yuh've got of winnin' through the Senate Commission."

"What chance have we got anyway?" somebody supported the argument of Johns. "If Ramon holds us here and lets the Commission find us with the stone in our possession, not a homestead will be left us. McKinney's gal can change things if she quits fakin' that she is a prisoner."

The homesteaders shook McKinney to returning consciousness. Walked him between two big men, to a leaning juniper. In plain sight of Neva, too.

"Brad, stop it!" came the tied girl's frenzied plea.

Brad was ready to respond to the appeal. He stalked after the lynchers, maybe to die; he didn't know. They were standing McKinney against the juniper, while a man climbed the tree. Brad jerked the climber down, took his gun. Pushed away two men near McKinney. Then put his back to the tree and whipped two guns up.

"The first man that touches that rope around McKinney's neck," he told them, "is a-goin' to taste hot lead. I mean it, fellers; yuh're stranglin' out yore last chance when yuh hang McKinney."

For a moment there came a queer silence. Homesteaders looked into the two gun muzzles, back to each other's faces. Brad Grayson seemed too sincere to question. He was too deadly a gunslinger to be disposed of without loss of life to those who tried to get him. While the uncertain deadlock held, Don Ramon turned a neat trick.

"That's the stuff, Brad!" he cried. "Don't let them best us in any such fashion!"

It was like a match to oil-soaked rags. Don Ramon bid fair to remove both Brad and McKinney with that one crafty cry.

"Didn't I tell yuh," a homesteader bellowed. "Grayson is in with the McKinneys. He's in love with the gal—and betrays us to git her!"

"Gimme a gun, Brad," McKinney said. "We'll go out together."

Strange turn of events. McKinney meant his offer, in appreciation for the courageous stand Brad had taken. But his words only confirmed in the minds of the homesteaders their belief that Brad had double-crossed them. A new murmur of rage began in their midst.

McKinney tried to step over to Brad. But men rushed them from all sides. Brad had his guns, but he hesitated to start mowing down men who had committed no greater sin against him than misunderstanding. Misunderstanding particularly inflamed by Don Ramon. A stone came crashing into Brad's forehead, knocked him to his knees. A club whacked down across his arms. With the guns thus knocked downward, homesteaders swarmed onto him.

He fought savagely to shake them off. But that blow in the forehead had left him weak. Too many were on him. Blood streamed down his forehead, over his face. They crashed him helplessly to the earth, tightened rawhide on his wrists until it cut into the flesh.

"Now string him up with McKinney!" somebody yelled.

Johns quieted the men, made Brad sit up to face them.

"Got anything to offer against that program, Brad?" Johns demanded.

"Nothin' you fools would listen to."

"Now don't be a hot-headed fool yoreself, Brad."

"Well, I still got to say I think the McKinneys would play heaps fairer ef yuh hang Ramon and give 'em a new chance. As for my bein' a traitor, I reckon I had 'em shoot my own dad to make my opposition to McKinney look real, huh?"

"I was thinkin' of how yuh lost yore dad," Johns nodded. "Boys, I'm for givin' him the benefit of the doubt. We'll put him on a horse and start him shaggin' it outa the country. But yuh better keep goin', boy."

"I'm not runnin'," Brad told them. "Yuh might as well swing me now ef yuh think I'll stay out of it."

"You'll think better of it, after yuh cool off. Load 'im up, boys."

"We're goin' to hang 'im right now," a sullen voice called.

A LITTLE group had drawn to one side. Newcomers to the valley who had never known Brad while he lived here. Some of them who had not liked blunt old man Grayson himself. Johns squared around at them. "Brad is on his way," he vowed. "We got to stick together, men. But effen yuh want to start any monkey-shines, why now's the time to do it. Brad, yuh might need this to defend yoreself with."

Johns handed Brad his six-shooter. The dissenters were effectively squelched; three men rode behind Brad when he was started off. McKinney had swooned away again. Brad heard Johns say they could not hang him till he came to. Brad had the feeling that blustering old Johns did not mean to hang McKinney at all.

Brad's mind and heart were in a turmoil as he rode away from the tense cluster of men. He had to go back and take Neva away from Ramon. Some way, somehow. He would rather have been burned alive than to ride off and leave the girl in Ramon's power, with Ramon claiming her to be his legal wife. "I'm not even goin' to fake a retreat," he vowed. "What's this?"

He cupped a hand over his eyes, to look against the morning sun. Made sure his eyes were not playing him tricks. It was real. A column of U.S. cavalry! Winding up the canyon, at a trot, a mile away. Detrained that morning. They would encounter Ramon's force first. But there, of course, they would find no resistance. Brad galloped back to higher ground, where he could see the homesteaders. The most belligerent thought he was coming back to make fresh trouble. One of them threw a rifle up and cracked a bullet within a few inches of Brad's head.

"Hey, the U.S. cavalry is right on yuh there," Brad cried. "Better high-tail it, fellers, or they'll throw the last one of yuh in jail."

The homesteaders wouldn't believe him at first. Then the notes of a bugle told the truth. The homesteaders were in a new panic; they had no notion of fighting the army. Brad's warning might prove all too true, about the jail. They began to scatter. McKinney was left on the ground. Homesteaders scurried for their horses.

Chapter Seven

IN THE other force, Ramon got busy. It would never do for the troops to find him with Neva tied up. Yet he dared not turn her loose, for her to contradict the story he would tell the officer and the Commission. Further, he would not want Brad to be on the loose. That cowboy had a way of making himself heard.

Ramon said to big, yellow-toothed Lash Bowyer who had not taken Neva's discharge of him seriously, "Keep about fifteen of the men here. Stall the troop captain till I get away with the rest. Here, Humpy, Greb, Smith. You boys throw that girl onto a horse. Hit up through that little side arroyo over there; I'll catch you soon. The rest of you boys fork horses and scatter. Don't come back. either. You who stay here tell the soldiers that you were here solely to stop homesteaders from removing Stone Number 16 from its position west of the Grayson homestead.

Ramon's instructions told clearly that he counted on the support of the troops. He did not want to have a bunch of cutthroats on hand for the troop commander to look on with suspicion. Accordingly, he dug a money belt from under his fancy black shirt and began to thrust pay-

off money at his dismissed hirelings.

With the men paid off, Ramon counted out one thousand dollars. This he held up. "That's for the one of you," he promised the discharged men, "who knocks Brad Grayson from the saddle. But you must come and get me, and take me to see the carcass."

Brad, watching from a distance, saw part of this and understood most of it. Most of all, he read Ramon's intent when four men put the protesting Neva onto a horse and hurried away with her. The men held to low ground. Keeping out of sight of the soldiers, Brad pretended to head the other way in flight. But he cut back quickly. Don Ramon certainly was not going to be allowed to start on any honeymoon with his halfway bride.

Brad crossed the main canyon. Dodged scattering homesteaders. He was afraid some of them might take shots at him. Now he was outlawed indeed, even by the very men whom he had been helping so earnestly. The army would be after him, if Ramon got them convinced of his righteousness. Certainly Ramon would not feel safe until he knew that Brad Grayson was dead.

Brad dipped over into the head of the arroyo into which the men had taken Neva. Here he left his horse. Hid behind a clump of prickly pear cactus. Waited. Not for long; the four men came hurrying up the canyon. One was riding out in the lead. Rifle across his lap, eyes examining every tree, rock and hump of ground. Brad ducked out of sight, let the front rider pass.

Here came the others. One leading Neva's horse. Two behind her. They kept the horses in a trot. Brad knew what a disadvantage it was to have that man up ahead there with the rifle. But that couldn't be helped. Just as the trio with Neva were getting opposite him, he lifted head and gun over the cactus. Three men pulled up short. One let out a yap to the rider ahead. "Drop off—quick,

hombres!" Brad ordered.

They rolled off. None too quickly, however. All watching for the front rider to interfere. "Now hoof it down the arroyo," Brad ordered. "And—better run!"

He stung a bullet through the fleshy part of one man's seat. That sent him into a hard run. The others stayed close after him. Brad ran out to Neva, thrust reins into her hands, swung onto the best of the

three horses. "Ride for it, Neva," he told her. "Cut up over the ridge here."

They did fight the horses hard up the steep slope. Just as they topped out, however, a rifle cried from up the ridge. The front man had known what to do. Brad was knocked backwards a little in the saddle. A bullet had struck him in the right side and passed out the back just below the shoulder blade.

"Brad, you're hit!" Neva cried, anguish in her voice.

Brad did not answer. He recovered himself, charged up the ridge. The rifle spoke again, missed. Brad roweled his horse harder. The rifle popped the third time. The bullet caught Brad's mount in the forehead; it fell headlong. Brad leaped clear of it, continued his charge, afoot. Neva was right behind him. Both of them cut loose at the head showing around the tree. The man fired the fourth time. Then broke away in panicky flight. Brad took swift aim, barely in front of him. Neva fired about the same time. The man went sprawling down the hillside. Lodged against a clump of bear grass. Dead.

Neva swung her horse in close to him. Brad bounded up behind her. The horse tried to pitch. The girl yanked his head up, talked him out of it. Got him into a trot.

"I got another horse right up there," Brad told her.

"You're not able to ride by yourself," she feared.

"Got to, girl," he answered. "The army will listen to Ramon. Ramon will never let me live to be questioned by the soldiers, anyhow."

"That's right; but we'll outfox them."

THEY SWUNG into the dip. Neva leaped down, mounted Brad's horse. Off they clattered. Behind them went up a loud bellow.

"Hey, soldiers—come! Grayson has murdered a man and kidnaped Miss McKinney!"

"That's what I got to contend

THE SILVER KID RETURNS

in T. W. Ford's thrilling feature novel

BROKEN-GUN FRAME-UP

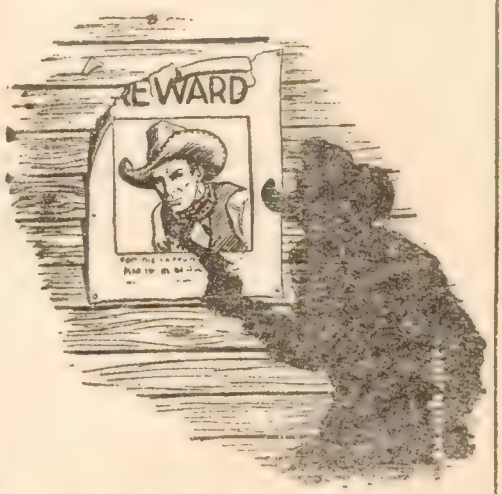
★ ★ ★

Trigger-quick Tempers lead to hot lead, when romance ends at

THE HATE FENCE

by W. F. Bragg

These and 8 other stories appear, complete in the December issue



FAMOUS WESTERN

with," Brad said, in bitter dejection.

He was whipped, maybe dying. Every man's hands against him, for the time being at least. Strange how this fight had changed. Now his only friend alive in the valley, it seemed, was the girl who had horsewhipped him in the jail but twenty-four hours earlier.

"The army surgeon will take care of papa for the hour," she soothed her anxiety, "you just have to be put beyond Ramon's reach."

"I'll make it by myself," he protested.

"I'm not risking it."

She held her eyes straight ahead when she said that, tried to make it sound matter-of-fact. But a mad thrill swept through Brad's heart. She was staying with him, saving his life. Even when her heart bled to be back with her father. True, he had just rescued her from Ramon's henchmen, and perhaps an unthinkable experience with Ramon himself. And saved her father from lynching. That might call for something in return. But Brad felt with keenest intensity just then it was for him that she left her father and not merely to repay a debt of gratitude.

He was going to need her sorely. His wound made him sick, deathly sick; blind spells swept over him. He could hardly cling onto the saddle horn. Neva rode close beside him. Sometimes she bent over and steadied him in the saddle, when it seemed he would tumble off. The touch of her hand would bring new life beating into him.

"We had better head for the mountain," he told her.

"But we can't get up over that long cliff spreading around the foothills there," she declared.

"There's a cow trail up in one spot," he answered. "Right beside three big yellow pines at the foot of the cliff. Head for them. Mebbe the soldiers nor Ramon won't find the way up."

But Ramon and a dozen men did find their way up. Evidently, Ramon had decided he himself must

[*Turn Page*]

Free for Asthma

If you suffer with attacks of Asthma and choke and gasp for breath, if restful sleep is difficult because of the struggle to breathe, don't fail to send at once to the Frontier Asthma Company for a FREE trial of the FRONTIER ASTHMA MEDICINE, a preparation for temporary symptomatic relief of paroxysms of Bronchial Asthma. No matter where you live or whether you have faith in any medicine under the sun, send today for this free trial. It will cost nothing.

Frontier Asthma Co. 462 Niagara St. — 855-D Frontier Bldg. Buffalo 1, N. Y.

Ko-rekT Heals Pyorrhea and all other gum infection

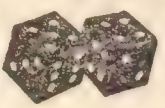
IN 1 TO 3 WEEKS, OR MONEY REFUNDED

Ko-rekT is the new revolutionary, wonder performing, dental instrument. Ko-rekT may also protect the teeth against decay. Cleans the teeth as never before. Ko-rekT is easy to use, will last a lifetime. Results established by clinical tests.

Usual gum treatments and the toothbrush often lead to false security and health breakdown. Gum infection drains poison into the body, that affects the heart and other vital organs . . . causes rheumatism . . . distorts face and body, and threatens life itself.

Use Ko-rekT, and in a few days the health of your mouth will be restored. Do this yourself at home. Ko-rekt 3 minutes daily to keep your mouth healthy. You need nothing more. Ko-rekT, to prevent gum infection and tooth decay. Don't delay, it may be later than you think! Send $12.50 now, have Ko-rekT by return mail.

SIAMPAUS MFG. CO., Dept. DA-I
3420 Lincoln Blvd., Omaha 3, Nebr.
Our use of U. S. mails is your protection



DICE — CARDS

Perfect Dice, Trick Dice, Flats, Loads, Misspots Caps, Trick Cards, Strippers and Readers, Other Game Supplies. Send Dime for complete Catalog.

MERCURY SPECIALTY
Dept. M Box 33 — Raton, N. Mexico

FOR MEN ONLY?
THE GIRLS LOVE IT TOO

GALS
GAGS
PHOTOS
CARTOONS

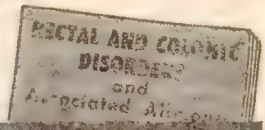
4 BOOKS
EACH DIFFERENT!
MORE THAN 500 PAGES
for only 1 BUCK!
MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

LARCH BOOK CO.
118 E. 28th Street, Dept. 130-AB, New York 16, N.Y.

How I Found Relief For PILES

If you are among the thousands of men and women who suffer from Piles, Fistula or other rectal disorders, take the first step toward finding relief from these treacherous conditions. Send for our Free Book which describes symptoms, and the treatment that has proved so sucessful for so many years. Write McCleary Clinic and Hospital, 1226 Elms Blvd., Excelsior Springs, Missouri.

FREE BOOK GIVES YOU THE FACTS



WRITE FOR YOUR COPY TODAY

FEET ACHE OR PAIN?

Why suffer agonizing foot pain which robs you of the pep to enjoy life? TRY NEW PROVEN SCIENTIFIC FOOT CUSHIONS and get amazing comfort and relief from agonizing foot troubles that rob life of its joy! Walk or stand with perfect comfort and ease. These wonderful Foot Cushions help cushion and relieve your ARCHES and ENTIRE FEET from HEEL to TOES. So light, flexible — Removable — fits all work, dress, sport shoes. Recommended for Tired, Aching Feet! For corns, Callouses, Weak Arch Foot Pains. SEND NO MONEY: C.O.D. $1.98 plus postage, or send $2.00 and we pay postage. (State if Man or Woman and shoe size.)
SEAGEE CO., 2 Allen St., Dept 34PC New York 2, N.Y.

DRUNK?

Jeopardizing HAPPINESS, HEALTH, and INCOME? Relief may be obtained economically and quickly with U.M.R. ORIGINAL HOME METHOD. MAY BE USED SECRETLY! Used by leading psychiatric institutions to help BUILD AVERSION AND ELIMINATE DESIRE FOR ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES, now available to you. Has helped bring relief to many drinkers as a method of temporary ALCOHOL WITHDRAWAL and by BREAKING DRINKING CYCLE. Not a remedy for underlying personality maladjustment causing alcoholic excesses. DOES NOT FOR ANY PROLONGED PERIOD, INTERFERE WITH WORK FOR SOCIAL LIFE. One of many satisfied users writes: "Your method is wonderful! Am very happy over it." — Mrs. M. D. S., Ill. Prepared by pharmacist formerly connected with leading alcoholic sanitarium. Comes in plain wrapper READY TO USE, complete with instructions. WHY PAY MORE FOR IMITATIONS? ORDER ORIGINAL U.M.R. METHOD TODAY AND SAVE!

FREE! with order: generous supply special capsules to help tone up appetite and nervous and digestive system.

SEND NO MONEY! NOW ONLY $4.50!

USE 15 DAYS AT OUR RISK — SATISFACTION GUARANTEED OR RETURN UNUSED PORTIONS AND $4.50 REFUNDED. Send name and address, pay postman $4.50 plus postage! Send $4.50 with order and we pay postage.

UNITED MEDICAL RESEARCH
Box 428, Dept. U-10, Minneapolis 1, Minn.

DICE — CARDS — GAME SUPPLIES
Perfects, Flats, Weights, Strippers and Readers
Made to your specifications
Established 1909 Catalogue upon Request
HILL BROS., Box D. Salida, Colo.

BOOKLETS

The kind grownups like. Each one of these booklets is POCKET SIZE, also contains 8 ILLUSTRATIONS, and is full of fun and entertainment. 12 of these joke booklets, ALL DIFFERENT, shipped prepaid upon receipt of $1.00, or 24 BOOKLETS, ALL DIFFERENT, shipped prepaid for $2.00, cash or money order. No orders sent C.O.D. Print name and address and mail to:
TREASURE NOVELTY CO., Dept. 27P
28 Cooper Station, New York 3, N. Y.

conduct this pursuit, and not leave it to individual greed for the thousand dollars reward. Now they were pushing hard after the cowboy and his girl. Recurring waves of sickness made Brad doubt that he would ever get away. Twice he wilted down, barely clinging to the saddle horn through instinctive effort. Neva shook him back to consciousness.

"Buck up—you can make it," she encouraged.

"Shore I can. You go back to yore dad."

"Not just yet. Where's the best place to hide in this mountain?"

"They're after us purty hot, huh?"

"Yes."

"Mebbe we better not risk any place. They'll keep on searchin'. Let's make it through the mountain and hit the railroad. Ketch a train, mebbe."

Neva said nothing in reply. He knew she doubted his ability to go half that far, although she would not say so.

Two miles. Three. On, on. Three men were gaining on them constantly. Only five hundred yards behind. One was Ramon. Brad's horse began to play out from the terrific pace up mountain trails. Another mile. The trail left the boxed-in canyon and cut back around the mountain. Only two men were after them now. Brad's horse gave out entirely. A forest of pine and oak below them. Shin oak and aspen above. Neva made Brad take her horse. She trotted ahead of him, afoot.

Smoke! It lifted in the canyon below. Then back behind them. The pine woods had been set afire. Tinder-dry, too. Back where the trail left the canyon a second fire began boiling up. A plain story. In his vicious hate, Ramon meant to burn them alive. Then, if her father died, he would make stick his claim of being Neva's husband, and thus inherit her father's wealth. Sweet revenge against the girl who had turned him down, for an enemy cowboy.

A light wind whipped both fires into quick progress. Neva gave one look backward. Retreat was cut off.

The fire began to lap up the mountainside below them, gathering more fury as it went. The girl's face drained white. Without a word, she broke into a run up the trail. Their only hope lay in beating the fire to the shoulder of ridge toward which the trail led. Then plunge off into the next canyon.

"Neva, get up behind me," Brad implored.

"I'd rather spare the horse. We can make it."

THEY DID round out on the ridge. But the next canyon already was a red inferno. Set by the pursuer who had dropped behind. Smoke boiled into the heavens. The fire was howling up the mountain. Would soon cross the trail. Just below them, the fire was leaping a hundred feet above the treetops. They had to abandon the trail and take to the rock-ribbed mountainside, where a horse couldn't go. Brad gave the poor animal a mercy shot. Neva took Brad's arm, tried to help him climb.

"There's some old cliff dwellings up around there somewhere," Brad panted. "Mebbe three hundred yards; mebbe half a mile. If we can make it into 'em, we might pull through this."

Climb. Climb. Tortuous steps. Brad's strength was failing fast. The fire was raging nearer. No sign of the cliff dwellings. Brad was so sick. Weak. Blind at times.

"Brad, fight it!" the courageous girl urged frenziedly.

Brad was fighting. With all his heart and strength. They struggled upward, trying to run. It was too steep and rough. Took an hour, it seemed, to go a hundred yards. Hot smoke over them. The flames not far behind. Brad staggered. Bounded upward. Went utterly blind. Began to fall. Neva caught him. Held him up. Slapped his face. "Brad—Brad, dear!" she cried. "Hold on! I see the cliffs!"

Sheer fighting spirit enabled Brad to retain his senses. If he ever fell,

[*Turn Page*]

NOW HEARS WHISPERS!

New Kind of Hearing-Aid Makes Living Worthwhile!

NO DEVICE OF ANY KIND IN EITHER EAR

This HARD-OF-HEARING man even HEARS WHISPERS AGAIN, yet there is *no device of any kind in his ear!* No so-called "invisible" or "phantom" earpiece, no headband, no pressure anywhere! Whether or not you now wear a hearing aid, you owe it to yourself to prove that you can now HEAR with a brilliance and clarity you never expected to enjoy again, yet *never* wear anything in your ear! Mail coupon at once for FREE information about this amazing invention!

ACOUSTICON, Dept. M-19
95-25 149th St., Jamaica 1, N.Y.
Please send me complete illustrated information about your marvelous new hearing invention that requires nothing in my ear and no headband.

Name.....

Address.....

City..... Zone..... State.....

PRAYER

Is a Tremendous Mighty Power! Are you facing difficult **Problems? Poor Health? Money** or **Job Troubles? Love** or **Family Troubles?** Are you **Worried** about someone dear to you? Is someone dear to you **Drinking** too much? Do ever get **Lonely—Unhappy—Discouraged?** Would you like to have more **Happiness, Success** and **"Good Fortune"** in **Life?**

If you do have any of these **Problems,** or others like them, dear friend, then here is wonderful **NEWS—NEWS** of a remarkable **NEW WAY of PRAYER** that is helping thousands of other men and women to glorious **NEW** happiness and joy! Whether you have always believed in **PRAYER** or not, this remarkable **NEW WAY** may bring a whole **NEW** world of happiness and joy to you—and very, very quickly, too!

So don't wait, dear friend. Don't let another minute go by! If you are troubled, worried or unhappy **IN ANY WAY**—we invite you to clip this **Message** now and mail with 10c (coin or stamps) so we can rush **Full Information** to you by **AIR MAIL** about this remarkable **NEW WAY of PRAYER** that is helping so many, many others and may just as certainly and quickly help **YOU.**

You will surely bless this day—so please don't delay! Just clip this **Message** now and mail with your name, address and 10c to **LIFE-STUDY FELLOWSHIP, Box 6208, Noroton, Conn.** We will rush this wonderfull **NEW Message of PRAYER** and **FAITH** to you by **AIR MAIL.**

WAR SURPLUS VALUES!

Combat Jackets, water proof, lined and interlined. 4 pockets. (sizes 34-40)	$3.99
Army Wool Shirts (sizes 13½ to 15½)	2.25
Army Wool pants (waist sizes 28-36)	2.99
Army H. B. T. Jackets (sizes 34-42)	1.29
Army H. B. T. Pants (waist sizes 28-36)	1.59
Wool Blankets	4.99
Army Raincoats (Rub.) (sizes 36-44)	2.49

Satisfaction Guaranteed or Money Back.
Send money and we pay postage — or send $1 deposit, balance COD plus postage.

SEND FOR FREE CATALOG For Family

GUILD Dept. 325, 120 E. Broadway New York 2, N. Y.

Get into BUSINESS for Yourself!

METALIZING BABY SHOES AT HOME IN SPARE TIME

Get facts now about amazing money making *Warner Success Plan* that shows you every easy step in completely charted path to personal independence—with your home as your headquarters . . . This proved and tested Plan is working like magic. It's backed by an old, reliable company . . . And we send it to you on a No-Risk Trial Money Back Guarantee.

QUICK CASH WAITING

Demand for METALIZED Baby Shoes and other keepsakes is growing bigger daily. Our Tested Plan Shows How to Do the Work, How to Bring in the Business, How to Make as much as $5 an Hour. Spare or full time, big steady profits are waiting for you. Send penny postcard or mail coupon for FREE facts. Act! Time is precious.

FREE offer of COMPLETE MONEY MAKING PLAN • SEND NO MONEY Just Mail COUPON

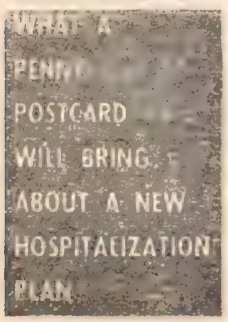
Ray Brandell, Mgr., Warner Electric Co.,
1512 JARVIS AVE., DEPT. 185-W CHICAGO 26, ILL.

Please rush complete details about your No-Risk Trial Money Back Plan for Metalizing Baby Shoes. Everything you send is FREE and costs me nothing—now or ever.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY..... ZONE..... STATE.....



E. J. Becker, President of the Mutual Hospitalization Insurance Company wants everyone who needs protection, and who doesn't, for hospitalization from sickness or accident to write him. Yes, everyone from birth to age 70 is eligible. Get FREE of obligation all facts about the amazing new policy that pays you the *most* for the *least* money. Here are a few of the benefits. There's no time limit for hospital room and board. . . policy pays as long as doctor tells you to stay. Pays you at the rate of $150 per month if hospitalized from sickness or accident. (sanitarium and rest homes excluded). Also pays extra at the rate of $100 per month for loss of wages while hospitalized for accident. THERE'S NO TIME LIMIT. (Under 18 years of age excluded from this feature). Also pays $1,000 or $5,000 for accidental death. There are benefits galore to help in financial problems that follow hospitalization. Even Infantile Paralysis is included. Maternity at a slight extra charge. You get cash regardless of payments from other insurance, including compensation. Think of it! All these benefits and more, and protection costs only 3c a day. Children under 18 as low as 1 1/2c a day.

Write now for the FREE facts to E. J. Becker, President Mutual Hospitalization Insurance Co. Dept. 5912, Wilmington, Delaware.

there he would burn. Tongues of fire lapped over the trail. Roared after them.

"That's it—fight, cowboy! Beat Ramon! Beat death and hell! Come on—pull, darling!"

She was tugging frenziedly at his arm. Hauling him upward. Making him hold onto consciousness when other men would have been dead somewhere below.

They were reeling along the base of a great red cliff. Flames tipped hot tongues at them. Brad rallied, ran along the cliff. Some fifty-odd feet above them there was a deep recess beneath an overhanging cliff roof. Barely discernible in the smoke was the crude masonry of a stone wall, no more than four feet high. As a boy, Brad had been up there once.

"Toe-holds in the rock wall," he muttered brokenly.

That was the only way up. Toeholds dug into the slightly inclined rock perhaps two thousand years before. Weathered away at the lower end. Neva pushed Brad to the effort. They began to climb. Flames hit the rock below them. Licked at their feet. Smoke nearly suffocated them. It was a dizzy climb even for well people, unhampered by fire.

Ten steps. Fifteen. Neva behind, on hand against Brad's leg to steady and push him. Brad was wholly blind. All senses gone, save a fierce will to hold on. He felt for each chiseled step, sometimes hardly knew when his fingers were in them. But they kept going. Up. Up. Suffocating. Clothes afire. Lungs trying to repel the hot air.

As in a vague dream, Brad saw a darksome opening before him. Tried to crawl into it. Felt Neva's hands pushing him. Fell inside. Neva dropped in with him. Beat him on the breast, in the face. "Brad, one tiny try—there's an inner room—safer!"

She was nearly gone herself. But she half pulled him into the dark room back of the first. There Brad fell on his face. Neva tumbled in, her body lying half across his. Both so nearly dead they could not speak or move. But safe!

Chapter Eight

BRAD peered out onto the blackened world below him. Charred logs. Black-shrouded trees. Black earth. And a black future for him. Eight days had passed since he and Neva had found refuge in the ancient cliff house. His wound was getting better. A little fever yet, and soreness. But the doctor, whom Neva had brought blind-folded three times, had declared he was beyond danger.

But now he was an outlaw. The Congressional Commission was in charge down in Sonrisa Valley. They had U. S. marshals and troops looking for Brad. Would find him, sooner or later. Better get out, soon as Neva came back today. He was nearly saddle-able. And thirsty. He searched the charred woods below him again. Saw no sign of danger. Took the painted Indian bowl found in the room, now used for water. Went climbing down the steep stone steps. Slowly, sore in body. There was a tiny spring down around the mountainside some five hundred yards. He made his way toward it, watching the burnt woods for danger. He could almost feel eyes on him. No telling when some sneaking reward hunter would cut loose at him without warning. Five hundred dollars reward had been posted for his capture.

Ramon Brandon was hunting for him, too. Far more danger from Ramon's hired guns. Ramon was in the saddle in the Valley. He had managed to have his marriage to Neva pronounced legal, so she had told Brad. That made her a sort of outlaw, too, from the man who was proclaimed her legal husband. Her father was dead. Never had regained consciousness after the army surgeon treated him. Neva, therefore, had been left alone to fight Ramon's grip on the legal machinery. The chairman of the Commission had ac-

[*Turn Page*]

WINS WRITING SUCCESS THOUGH CRIPPLED WITH ARTHRITIS

"When I became almost crippled with arthritis, N. I. A. training proved its value. I began acting as local correspondent for two papers. Then I started a publication of my own. 'The Beekeeper' became a reality and a success. Were I physically able, I would crawl to the top of the house and shout the merits of N. I. A. Training."—Elmer Carroll, Route 3, Box 540, Lansing, Mich.

Why Can't You Write?

It's much simpler than you think!

So many people with the "germ" of writing in them simply can't get started. They suffer from inertia. Or they set up imaginary barriers to taking the first step.

Many are convinced the field is confined to persons gifted with a genius for writing.

Few realize that the great bulk of commercial writing is done by so-called "unknowns." Not only do these thousands of men and women produce most of the fiction published, but countless articles on business affairs, human interest stories, social matters, home-making, sports, etc., as well.

Such material is in constant demand. Every week thousands of checks for $25, $50 and $100 go out to writers whose latent ability was perhaps no greater than yours.

The Practical Method

Newspaper work demonstrates that the way to learn to write is by writing! Newspaper copy desk editors waste no time on theories or ancient classics. The story is the thing. Every copy "cub" goes through the course of practical criticism—a training that turns out more successful authors than any other experience.

That is why Newspaper Institute of America bases its writing instruction on the Copy Desk Method. It starts and keeps you writing in your own home on your own time. And upon the very same kind of **actual assignments** given daily to metropolitan reporters. Thus you learn by **doing**, not by studying the individual styles of model authors.

Each week your work is analyzed constructively by practical writers. Gradually they help to clarify your own **distinctive style**. Writing soon becomes easy, absorbing. Profitable, too, as you gain the "professional" touch that gets your material accepted by editors. Above all, you can see constant progress week by week as your faults are corrected and your writing ability grows.

Veterans: Course Approved For Veterans' Training!

To take advantage of G. I. Bill of Rights, Veterans **must enroll within the next few months.**

Have You Natural Ability?

Our Writing Aptitude Test will reveal whether or not you have natural talent for writing. It will analyze your powers of observation, your imagination and dramatic instinct. You'll enjoy taking this test. There is no cost or obligation. Simply mail the coupon below, today. Newspaper Institute of America. One Park Avenue, New York 16, N. Y. (Founded 1925.)

Free

Newspaper Institute of America
One Park Avenue, N. Y. 16, N. Y.

Send me without cost or obligation your Writing Aptitude Test and further information about writing for profit.

Mr.
Mrs.
Miss .....

Address .....

☐ Check here if eligible under G. I. Bill of Rights.
(All correspondence confidential. No salesman will call on you.)
31-W-590

Copyright 1949 Newspaper Institute of America

CORTINAPHONE
makes it FUN to Learn
French-Spanish
GERMAN • ITALIAN • BRAZILIAN
RUSSIAN • JAPANESE

BIG OPPORTUNITIES and JOBS await Americans who speak a foreign language. Millions being spent in Europe, Latin America. Travel booming.

Listen to this Record!

Only 15 Minutes a Day

Speak FRENCH, SPANISH, German, Italian, Brazilian, Russian, or Japanese like a native! CORTINAPHONE METHOD, famous for 68 years, teaches you—BY LISTENING. Right in your own home, relaxed and at ease.

Count Cortina

Sent on 5 Days' Approval

THOUSANDS have learned a second language this quick, easy way for PLEASURE and BUSINESS! FREE 32-page book describes famous method; tells how you can try it at home for 5 days. NO COST IF NOT DELIGHTED. Send for free book NOW!

VETS! ... Write Today NOW

CORTINA ACADEMY (Established in 1882)
Dept. 12512 105 W. 40th St., New York 18, N. Y.
Please send me – without obligation – your free book. I am interested in (check)
☐ French ☐ Spanish ☐ German ☐ Italian
☐ Brazilian ☐ Russian ☐ Japanese
Name .....
Address .....
City ..... State .....
☐ Check here if you are a VETERAN

ILLUSTRATED BOOKLETS AND NOVELTIES
Our VEST POCKET series of ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS are full of humor with ILLUSTRATIONS. The NOVELTIES are the kind MEN want for EXCITEMENT and AMUSEMENT. 10 DIFFERENT booklets and 6 DIFFERENT novelties sent prepaid on receipt of $1. No C.O.D. orders or checks accepted. WHOLESALE PRICE LIST included with orders only.
LIVE WIRE NOVELTY CO., Dept 14-P
30 Orchard Street New York 3, N. Y.

DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO?
Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men.
In Business Since 1909
300,000 Satisfied Customers
THE NEWELL COMPANY
266 Clayton Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.
FREE BOOK

DICE • CARDS
MAGIC Cards—READ THE Perfect Dice, Magic Dice BACKS—Inks, Daubs, Poker Chips Gaming Layouts, Dice Boxes, Counter Games, Punchboards. WRITE FOR CATALOG TODAY.
K. C. CARD CO., 852 So. Wabash Ave., Chicago, Ill.

SONG POEMS WANTED TO BE SET TO MUSIC
Submit one or more of your best poems for free examination. Any subject. Send poem for details and information.
Phonograph Records Made
FIVE STAR MUSIC MASTERS
660 Beacon Bldg. Boston 8, Mass.

cused Neva of being blindly in love with the outlaw, Brad Grayson. And therefore had refused to believe the girl's vindictive charges against Ramon. Ramon's older brother, the senator, was out here to help Ramon make all his claims good.

"I'm going to make one final desperate attempt to convince them," Neva had told Brad upon her departure before daylight, on her last visit. "And it will de desperate, too."

That made Brad gravely anxious for her. In anticipation of her coming, he took from his shirt bosom the shaving equipment she had fetched him. Shaved. Felt with satisfaction the smooth chin. Frowned when he touched the healing sore on his forehead. Filled his two-gallon bowl. Moseyed back for his cliff house. He grew more uneasy. Again felt surely that unseen eyes were on him. Wondered where Neva was at the moment. Adjusted his heavy six-shooter into handier position in his breeches waistband. Searched trees, rocks, everything that could hide a lurking foe.

At the foot of the cliff, he sat down. Waited. A long, long hour. Neva was overdue. Why didn't she come? No longer must she remain within clutching grasp of Ramon Brandon. He got to feeling creepy. "Reckon I better climb up and have a looksee from my front door," he said to himself.

He went climbing up the steep face of the cliff. Stopped several times to look to both sides, everywhere. Still nobody. He toed on up. Near the top the steps forked. One set led over to the right, to a ledge. Brad climbed for the ledge, in preference to going back into the musty little rock room.

From the ledge he could survey the entire mountainside down below. The ancient people had chosen well their site as a refuge home. He could see down onto the blue mists of Sonrisa itself Stupendous country, peaceful. Glorious. But no longer for him. He had to get out.

The thoughts were revolving in his head when suddenly he went

rigid. What had warned him? No sound. Nothing his eyes saw. But he felt it. He looked back behind him, where the cliff shelf went back to form a shallow cave. A few more crudely shaped rooms were in the cave, most of them half in ruins. Were the ghosts of the long-dead people playing in the darksome space back of those rooms.

Brad peered inward. Could see nothing. Listened again. Heard nothing. Then he whiffed the air. Again and again. Blew outward through his big nostrils, sucked in fresh air again. Like a mettlesome horse smelling out a mountain lion on a cold morning. Hand on his gun handle.

Ah, there it was. The smell of a human body, unbathed for days. Barely distinguishable. But there. Brad leaned to a shoulder of rock, pointed his gun up over it.

"I got yuh covered, hombre. Come out," he ordered.

No answer. He was not positive the odor came from the cave. Somebody was in there. Or in the house. A bat came whirring out of the cave. Bats don't often leave their roosts at broad noon. Brad was sure now the hidden foe was in the cave. He therefore turned his back almost to his refuge room. That was his mistake.

"Freeze, Grayson!"

IT WAS Don Ramon's voice. Brad's head whipped around. But he never made a move to swing his body and gun hand around. Knew better. Ramon and three men had guns on him from the small side door of the room. Juan Bueno and one-eyed Greb.

"Nice vacation cottage you have here," Ramon taunted.

The very casualness of that taunt told that Ramon meant to enjoy mental torture of his victim before he made final disposition of him. Brad was sure that, in the end, Ramon meant to kill him. No taking him prisoner, and letting him talk to the Commission and soldiers. A sardonic smile twisted the corner of Ramon's heavy mouth.

[*Turn Page*]

OH! BOY! $50 A DAY

Easy Sales! Easy Money!

That's what you'll be shouting . . . when you line up with our sensational, fast selling item in your territory on a full time or spare time basis. Saves money for restaurants, lunch rooms, taverns, meat markets, food-beverage stores. Enormous field. No experience needed. WRITE QUICK for big money starting plan. Hurry!

UTILITY CO., 53 W. Jackson Blvd., Dept. 29, Chicago 4, Ill.

AGENTS — BIG MONEY in GLASSES

AMAZING NEW DEVICE TESTS EYES AT HOME! Save up to $15. Satisfaction guaranteed. Send for FREE SAMPLE KIT, take orders, make big, fast profits, in a new field. Virgin territory. Spare or full time. No experience or capital needed. Write today!

CLARK OPTICAL CO., Dept. A184 1148 W. Chicago Ave., Chicago 22, Ill.

DICE & CARDS

Transparent Beveled and Weights; Transparent Flats; Tops and Bottoms; Door Pops; Hit and Miss Combinations; Luminous Glasses and Readers; Shiners; Daub; Bicycle and Bee Readers. Rush FREE Catalog request.

FREE Catalog

"The Old Reliable"

D. SMYTHE CO.

BOX 15 NEWARK, MO.

OZARK LANDS

FOR ALL PURPOSES

For Your Pleasure and Profit

Priced from **$5.00 PER ACRE** and Upwards

Also Actual River Frontages

SEND FOR FREE LIST AND LITERATURE

HUBBARD

424 C MINNESOTA KANSAS CITY, KANSAS

COMPLETE SONG WRITING SERVICE

We write the music for your words without charge on 50-50 basis. We send you records, copies and copyright your song for you in Washington, D. C.

GUARANTEED PUBLICATION

We guarantee the publication of at least two songs each month by a legitimate B.M.I. music publisher. The writers receive advance royalty and a standard royalty contract. The publisher pays all publication expenses.

WHAT ARE YOUR CHANCES?

If you have ability your chances are good. Now song-writers become famous every year. Maybe this is YOUR year. Publishers are constantly on the lookout for good songs. Turn your material over to a firm whose business is SONGWRITING.

WRITE TODAY

SEND YOUR POEM or lyric today for free examination and complete information on our exceptional offer.

HOLLYWOOD TUNESMITHS

Dept. K-12 1558 No. Vine St., Hollywood 28, Calif.

NERVOUS STOMACH

ALLIMIN relieves distressing symptoms of "nervous stomach" —heaviness after meals, belching, bloating and colic due to gas. ALLIMIN has been scientifically tested by doctors and found highly effective. More than a 1/4 billion sold to date. Money back guarantee. At all good drug stores.

ALLIMIN Garlic Tablets

Illustrated Comic Booklets

Sell our ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS and other NOVELTIES. Each booklet size 4 1/2 x 3 3/4. We will send 25 assorted booklets prepaid upon receipt of $1.00 or 75 assorted booklets sent prepaid upon receipt of $2.00. Wholesale novelty price list sent with order only. No orders sent C.O.D. Send Cash or Money-order.

REPSAC SALES CO.

1 Orchard St., Dept. 50-P, New York 2, N. Y.

QUIT TOBACCO!

Remove all tobacco craving safe in every form and join the thousands who have completely obtained satisfactory freedom from tobacco with the old genuine TOBACCO BANISHER. Send for FREE BOOKLET describing the ill effects of tobacco, and a safe, reliable home treatment. A proven success for 39 years.

GUSTAF H. GUSTAFSON
2325 E. Vickery Blvd. Dept. R Ft. Worth 3, Texas

BIG MONEY TAKING ORDERS SHIRTS, TIES,

Sox, Pants, Jackets, Sweaters, Shoes, Uniforms, etc. Sales equipment Free. Experience unnecessary.
NIMROD 4922-EF Lincoln, Chicago

TRAVEL for ★"UNCLE SAM"

START as high as $3,450.00 Year

Prepare NOW for next Examinations

20,000 appointments each month

VETERANS GET SPECIAL PREFERENCE

Many examinations expected soon

City Mail Carriers
City Postoffice Clerks
Stenographers-Typists
Messengers,
Liquor Inspectors—
and many others
40-Page Book on Civil Service FREE

Mail Coupon today—SURE ★

COUPON

FRANKLIN INSTITUTE
(Not Government Controlled)
Dept. J-95
Rochester 4, N. Y.

Rush to me, entirely free of charge, 40-page book with: (1) A full description of U. S. Government jobs; (2) A list of U. S. Government jobs; (3) Tell me how to qualify for a job.

Name .....
Address .....
City .....Vet? .....

"What do yuh want with me?" Brad asked.

It was a useless question. Brad asked it while his thoughts whirled for some way out. Leap over the side of the cliff? That was sure death. Try to shoot it out with them? That was equally sure death. But he would have the satisfaction of taking Ramon with him, maybe.

"I want," Ramon told him, "for you to sign a statement which I've already prepared in advance for you. It says that you were born and raised on the Sonrisa. And that all your life Stone Number 16 has been in place on the ridge northwest of your father's ranch."

The trickery of that! Such a statement from Brad would leave no doubt in the Commission's mind that Ramon's claim of all Sonrisa Valley was just.

"Also," Ramon went on, "it says that you had teamsters hauling the rock down east through Sonrisa Valley, when I halted you with a dozen or so men. Now let your gun fall over the cliff, then come and get the paper, and the pen and ink I've got here."

The mockery of the thing sent an inward rage swelling into Brad's heart. Sell out the whole Sonrisa, just to save his one life? Not much. He was going to make Ramon pay for such a scheme, going to die fighting. Only let him get Ramon, and maybe one or two more while they were getting him. He wanted to throw them off their guard as much as possible before starting in. To that end, he faked sudden fear of Ramon.

"What—what terms will yuh give me," he asked, "if I do sign? I got to get something out of it, Ramon."

Those were the words of a weak man, in mortal fear of death. Brad wanted Ramon to think him just that. Then he was going to let them have it. Ramon seemed to take pleasure in finding his man so easily struck with terror.

"Almost your own terms," Ramon answered. "I'll let you take Neva away, give her a divorce so you can marry her. She's crazy over you."

Ramon never meant a word of that

false promise; Brad felt it. Felt, also, the smothered bitterness in Ramon's voice when he said Neva was crazy about him. Brad hated himself for even giving Ramon the opportunity for making such a false promise. He was getting ready to make the break.

"Drop the pistol," Ramon ordered impatiently. "Then we can talk cold turkey."

Brad hardly heard the order. For a whisper had come down to him from the cave. Neva's whisper. He had not been wrong when he thought somebody had been in the cave.

"Make Ramon talk for the Commission," the whisper said. "They're here."

Brad's brain was staggered by the next swift jumble of thoughts. Neva's work; she had got John Johns to inform Ramon of the whereabouts of this hideout. Then induced the Commission to come here and hide, to hear for itself what was said when Ramon demanded Brad's signature on the false evidence. It came out later that Neva herself had contrived to have suggested to Ramon the paper prepared in advance for Brad's signature. That was to make certain Brad would not be slaughtered without ado, when he showed up. The girl had had Johns to tell Ramon to watch the mountain spring from a distance, then go hide in the cliff house. She herself had watched the cliff with the Commission sen-

[*Turn Page*]

BE PROTECTED IN CASE OF SICKNESS or ACCIDENT

AMAZING, NEW HOSPITALIZATION PLAN COSTS ONLY 3¢ A DAY

NO TIME LIMIT ON HOSPITAL ROOM and BOARD

ANY HOSPITAL IN U. S.! CHOOSE YOUR OWN DOCTORS!

You get CASH BENEFITS for Hospital Room, Board and General Nursing care—WITHOUT TIME LIMIT. Policy pays as long as you stay. You get Doctor Benefits in case of accident. ...lump Cash Benefits for 74 specific Surgical Operations. ...Compensation for Loss of Time in case of accident. ...lump Cash payments for loss of Hands, Eyes, Foot.

For added protection, you get a big ACCIDENTAL DEATH Benefit as well as special INFANTILE PARALYSIS coverage. Think of it...all these AMAZING provisions...for only 3c A Day for Adults and 1 1/2c A Day for Children to age 18. Individual or entire family—birth to age 70—is eligible. A SPECIAL MATERNITY RIDER is available at small extra charge.

Benefits are paid in CASH direct to you...regardless of money you collect from other insurance sources for the same disability, including Workmen's Compensation. DON'T DELAY! Mail coupon below for FREE BOOKLET. No obligation. No agent will call.

POLICY PAYS
HOSPITAL ROOM AND BOARD FOR SICKNESS OR ACCIDENT
Per Month $150.00
(No time limit)
DOCTOR VISITS IN CASE OF ACCIDENT
Per Week $25.00
(No time limit)
74 SURGICAL OPERATIONS
$10 to $100
LOSS OF TIME IN CASE OF ACCIDENT
Per Week $25.00
(No time limit)
ACCIDENTAL DEATH
$1000 to $3000
LOSS OF EYES, HANDS, FOOT DUE TO ACCIDENT
$250 to $3000
INFANTILE PARALYSIS
UP TO $500. HOSPITAL BILLS
UP TO $500. DOCTOR BILLS While In Hosp.
UP TO $500. ORTHOPEDIC APPLIANCES

FREE Dont delay. Request FREE BOOKLET. No obligation.

NORTH AMERICAN MUTUAL INSURANCE CO.
Dept. D12-50 Wilmington, Del.

Please send me, without obligation, details about your "3c A Day Hospitalization Insurance Plan".

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....

ators, until Brad left. Then hid the Commission ahead of Ramon's party.

Brad's mind leaped quickly to the task of getting Ramon to incriminate himself. "Ramon," he vowed, "I'm not droppin' my gun; I don't trust you that far. Anyway, you know yuh can't make no such fake paper stick. There's too many people who know that Stone Number 16 has been at the east end of Cowhide Ridge always."

Ramon smiled. He was anxious to have Brad submit without a gun fight.

"You poor honest boy," he scoffed. "Don't you know the Commission is all fixed? They don't want facts. They want just legal excuse to award all of Sonrisa to the McKinney faction—to me, if you please. This paper signed by you will be all they'll need, added to what I've furnished them already."

"It's too much of a fake," Brad argued on. "I'll die right here and now before I'll betray all those homesteaders to save my own skin."

Brad made his avowal sound most ominous. Ramon seemed worried. This was harder than he had expected.

"Brad, don't be such a fool," he scolded. "It's too air tight a fake to be questioned. Here—I'll give you more than is coming to you. I'll give you one thousand dollars to do as I say and then clear out."

A SHRILL whistle suddenly cut short the words. For a few startled seconds, Ramon and his men froze just as they were. Then Brad was relieved to hear muffled voices coming from the inner room, behind the one in which were Ramon and his men. Four soldiers had been stationed in there, to call for the surrender of the trapped men if occasion arose. The first-sergeant's whistle had come from the cave, at the order of the Commission chairman.

Neva came scrambling from out of the darkness of the cave. Men behind her. Ramon's face drained white. For a few petrified seconds he hesitated. Then, when he saw how completely he was trapped in his own trap, a snarl of hate and rage whipped to his upper lip. All reason left him. Insane jealousy and insane rage seized him. His brittle temper did the rest.

"I'll fix you!" he shrieked. "Let him have it, boys!"

Ramon himself fired at Brad. But men in such a fit of rage are always apt to jerk the six-shooter muzzle to the left of the target. Ramon did so. The bullet only raked lightly off a rib. Brad's Colt began to talk. He was fanning it. Three swift shots. The first missed. The second got Ramon under the left eye. He fell out the door, went hurtling down over the cliff.

Only one-eyed Greb chose to fight with the boss; he also hated Brad. A bullet from a soldier's six-shooter drilled through him. He still tried to complete his original aim on Brad. Brad had to let him have a bullet through the breast. Then it was all over. Bueno and the fourth man had jerked hands over heads.

Neva hurried to Brad. Trembling. White. Three United States Senators and an army major were behind her.

"Again," Neva told them, "I'm undisputed owner of the Cross Nine. Stone Number 16 goes back to its rightful place. Give every homesteader a patent to his land. And give me —well, just your word that this cowboy is a square rider. Square fighter. With never any charge against him."

"Looks as though we'll have to agree with you," a heavy-jowled senator said gravely. "Of course, there'll be formalities to comply with. But I'm *convinced*."

"And here's one informality!" Neva cried.

She ran up, flung her arms about Brad. Turned her lips up to the cowboy who had risked losing her to fight for his sort of justice.

"Right now—darling!" she whispered.

Brad gripped her to him. Long. Fervidly. Fevered lips on hers. Heaven, there high up in the cliffs.

THE END

Build a Fine Business - - - FULL or SPARE TIME

Sell MASON LEATHER JACKETS

EVERY OUTDOOR WORKER A PROSPECT!

Get Started Right! *Don't Invest a Cent!*

We furnish EVERYTHING you need to start selling quality leather jackets at once—and to build a fine profitable ever-growing business for yourself. DON'T just "WISH" for independence FORGET worries and uncertainties! Get set now for big earnings in your own business, backed by this 46-year old million dollar company—Leader in its field!

WE SHOW YOU HOW TO MAKE MONEY FROM VERY FIRST HOUR

You get complete FREE SELLING OUTFIT! We furnish How-To-Do-It instructions that help you make sales from the very first hour—You get Proved Selling Aids—the practical experience of 4,000 Successful Salesmen—monthly newspaper given hard-hitting ideas.—Customer Gifts that bring 'Automatic Sales'—everything to help you cash in QUICK!

ALSO SELL EXCLUSIVE Velvet-eez

AIR-CUSHIONED SHOES for MEN and WOMEN

Make EXTRA money with popular, full leather-lined Chukka Boot and other fine styles with wonderful Velvet-eez comfort feature! Cradles feet on thousands of tiny air bubbles. Over 150 different styles for men, women. Full line of sport, work and dress shoes.

HARRY R. WILLIAMSON WHO HAS EARNED UP TO $21.50 IN A DAY Says

"I have had many experiences where I have sold as many as 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 pairs in one sitting. I received a phone call from one party, who wanted 2 pairs of shoes. I went to his store and made 7 sales. My advance commissions on my best days were $21.50."

NATIONAL ADVERTISING OPENS DOORS FOR YOU

Big, powerful ads in Good Housekeeping and other national magazines make you known to people as the Mason Certified Shoe Fitter. You get the benefit—we pay the BILLS!

GOOD HOUSEKEEPING SEAL CLINCHES SALES

Mason's VELVET-EEZ shoes awarded the Good Housekeeping Seal. This Seal ends hesitation. Helps you sell more customers more items. You enjoy the support of the institution people depend on for Guaranteed Satisfaction.

Guaranteed by Good Housekeeping

GET FREE OUTFIT

RUSH THE COUPON TODAY!

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-608, Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin.

Show me how I can get started in my own business, full or spare time, selling your exclusive Velvet-eez and other shoe styles in my community. Please rush FREE SELLING OUTFIT to me right away. Send everything free and postpaid. My own shoe size is:—

Name .....

Address .....

City .....

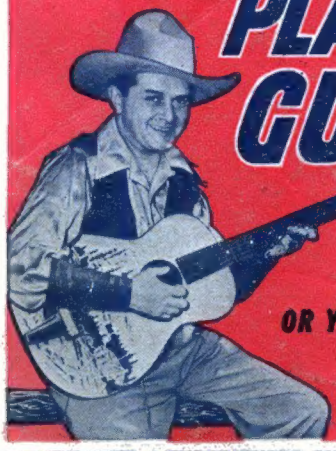
State .....

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.

Dept. M-608, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

NEW! BOB WEST'S AMAZINGLY EASY "PICTURE METHOD"

SHOWS HOW TO PLAY GUITAR IN 2 WEEKS



OR YOUR MONEY BACK

Think Of The Fun You'll Have

I WONDER HOW MARY LEARNED TO PLAY THE GUITAR SO WELL. A COUPLE OF WEEKS AGO SHE COULDN'T PLAY A NOTE. I THINK I'LL ASK HER.
WHY THERE'S NOTHING TO IT. I JUST SENT FOR BOB WEST'S STREAMLINED GUITAR COURSE AND LEARNED RIGHT AWAY.
A FEW DAYS LATER
LOOK, PEGGY, ALL I HAVE TO DO IS HOLD MY FINGERS LIKE IT SHOWS HERE IN THE PICTURES ...AND I'M PLAYING!
JUST THINK, PEGGY, A FEW WEEKS AGO I WAS A "WALLFLOWER." NOW LOOK AT HOW POPULAR I AM SINCE I LEARNED TO PLAY THE GUITAR.
YES, AND EVEN A TEN YEAR OLD CHILD CAN FOLLOW THIS SIMPLE "PICTURE METHOD"!

45 PHOTOS SHOW EXACTLY HOW TO PUT YOUR FINGERS

101 SONGS Words & Music INCLUDED!

★EXPERIENCED GUITAR PLAYERS have told me Bob West's "PICTURE METHOD" improves their playing tremendously and is ideal for beginners. Don't envy friends who are so popular because they play a musical instrument. LEARN TO PLAY THE GUITAR and hold the spotlight at parties, entertainments, or gatherings of friends. You will be amazed at how easy it is to learn to play the Guitar, even if you can't read a note of music.

Play in 2 WEEKS or YOUR MONEY BACK

Now let Bob West, radio's favorite Guitar player, show you how, with his sensational "Picture Method." Don't judge Bob West's "Picture Method" by any other "course" you have ever seen... This is an entirely new method. Most "instruction courses" have only 6 or 8 pictures... but Bob West's new method has **45 actual photographs!** It not only teaches, but **shows you** exactly where and how to place your fingers, etc. Most others offer a few songs... Bob provides 101! Yes, 101 songs chosen for their radio popularity, so you can sing and play right along with your favorite radio programs or records!

SEND NO MONEY!

Just send your name and address to BOB WEST. Pay postman only $1.69 plus C.O.D. and postage. Don't delay! Order NOW! Start playing beautiful chords the VERY FIRST day. Be playing beautiful music in two weeks or get your money back. Write **BOB WEST, Dept. 440, 1665 Milwaukee Ave., Chicago 47, Ill.**

SAVE MONEY ON A GUITAR

Bob West's own $19.95 value Autograph Guitar now only $14.95. Send $1 deposit, pay balance on delivery. Write Bob West, Studio 15, 1665 Milwaukee Ave., Chicago 47, Ill.

BOB WEST, Dept. 440,
1665 MILWAUKEE AVE., CHICAGO 47, ILL.

Dear Bob: Please rush one of your new streamlined "Picture Method" Guitar Courses and 101 Songs. I will pay postman $1.69 plus C.O.D. and postage. I understand that if I am not playing beautiful music in 2 weeks after I receive your Bob West Guitar Course, you will refund my $1.69.

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____ BOX_____ R.F.D._____

CITY_____ STATE_____

BOB WEST, Dept. 440,
1665 MILWAUKEE AVE., CHICAGO 47, ILL.

Dear Bob: Please rush one of your new streamlined "Picture Method" Guitar Courses and 101 Songs. I will pay postman $1.69 plus C.O.D. and postage. I understand that if I am not playing beautiful music in 2 weeks after I receive your Bob West Guitar Course, you will refund my $1.69.

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____ BOX_____ R.F.D._____

CITY_____ STATE_____